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"I KIN EAT A INJUN OR SWALLER A CHRISTIAN, BUT DURNED EF I KIN STAN' A TWO-LEGGED HORN-
TOAD—NO, SIR!"

The Hunchback of the Mines;
OR,
RECKLESS RALPH,
THE ROAD-AGENT.
A TALE OF THE CALIFORNIA PLACERS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "DEADLY DASH," "DAINTY LANCE,"
"BOY PARDS," ETC., ETC.

PROLOGUE.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END.

FIRE! FIRE!! FIRE!!!

The wild cry goes thrilling through the town, still further emphasized by the continuous peals of bells from the church towers and engine-houses. Men glance upward to where the night-shrouded heavens are reflecting in blood-red hues the dancing flames below, and either walk on in listless indifference or turn and rush toward the scene of destruction with wildly-beating heart, just as their worldly wealth is safe or seems threatened by the wanton fire-fiends.

Faster and louder ring out the bells, until the very air quivers with the concussion, telling each inmate of the Crescent City that this is no ordinary fire. Rapidly swell the human rivers filling each street leading to the scene of the conflagration, now and then dividing and failing back to either side with cries of angry terror as the hoarse warning is bellowed through a fireman's trumpet, as often closing behind the rumbling, clattering machine that spins dizzily along in the rear of the red-shirted heroes who man the rope and stubborn tongue—all speeding to danger, some to death.

The scene of the fire is reached, and even the most callous-hearted grow interested as they gaze.

It is in one of the poorest and most densely-populated districts of the great city, where the tenement-houses fairly swarm with life, where the family with an entire room to itself is looked upon as belonging to the upper crust, where hundreds of souls are sheltered by a single roof.

Already the flames are pouring through the doors and window-frames, stretching out their serpent-like tongues in quest of more fuel—already the engines are throwing streams of water from every side, as strong arms man the clattering brakes, and send them now down, now up, so fast that the human eye can scarcely follow their motions—already the great crowd is swaying back and forth with sobs, groans and choking cries, for all know now that the merciless flames are beginning to reap a harvest of death.

Tossing arms and agonized faces are seen at the upper windows, their escape cut off by the savage flames, driven higher and higher by the fiery swords—only to die at last.

Through the dancing flames and eddying smoke a white-clad form shoots down—down! heart-sickening thud—an involuntary recoil-

ing of the crowd, then a forward rush, and the first victim of that terrible holocaust is borne away, a mangled, horrible mass of what was once living, breathing, lovely humanity.

Desperately as the firemen struggle, the flames gain upon them. It is before the age of steam—the engines are all worked by hand, and even these are comparatively few in number. The hissing stream of water only seems to render the fire more furions, the heat more intense.

The hook and ladder men are hard at work, but they, too, are but poorly equipped for such a terrible battle. More than one poor wretch are they forced to see perish before their eyes, unable to save, risk their own lives as they may, while the strongly agitated mob sways to and fro, with shrieks and cries and sobbing prayers.

A white face at the window, high up amid the smoke wreaths and curling flames—the face of a girl, a child, wondrously beautiful even while distracted with fear and pain. She cries aloud for help—her sweet voice ringing clear and distinct above the roaring of the flames, the hissing of water, the clattering of engine-brakes and the murmur of the crowd below. She drags a helpless human figure to the window, and clasps its head to her bosom—the head of an old man with long, white hair—of one who already seems dead.

A groan of horror bursts from those below. They know that no ladder can reach that window—

A tall form bursts through their closely crowded ranks, hurling stout men aside as though they were helpless reeds. Superbly proportioned, a model of masculine strength and beauty. Handsome in face and form as a demigod. His blue eyes are ablaze with desperate daring, and his clear voice rings out like a trumpet-note:

"Courage, child—I will save you!"

He snatches up a heavy blanket which lay near, and rolls it in a pool of muddy water; then, before those who are nearest can even surmise his intention, he wraps the woolen cloth around his head and shoulders and plunges into the roaring flames rushing on what seems almost inevitable death.

Each second seems an hour—each minute a lifetime; but then a wild, tumultuous cheer arises from the crowd, for they catch a glimpse of the venturesome stranger through the red-tinged smoke as he gains the side of the fair girl.

They can see that his clothes are almost burned from his body—that the fragments are even now ablaze; but they see, too, that he does not notice this even by seeking to extinguish them. Instead, he removes the steaming blanket from his person and swiftly folds it around the form of the maiden—now unconscious, it may be dead.

That one enthusiastic cry—then a dead silence, save when a sob wells forth from some overcharged heart, for escape seems impossible even for such a daring man. Retreat by the way he came is cut off—even now the stairs and flooring are falling! The sparks shoot out at every opening, and the crowd below avert their heads or close their eyes, not to look upon that death-

scene—but once more the loud cheers ring forth.

The man balances himself upon the narrow window-sill, holding the muffled form of the girl clasped tightly to his breast. The flames are beginning to creep up and play around his feet, but he heeds them not. His eyes are fixed upon one frail hope—not for himself, but for her.

The street is narrow at this point, but little more than an alley. Across the way stands a flat-roofed building. Not one man in a thousand could leap across the intervening space, even from such a height and wholly unencumbered; but there is no other chance—to remain is certain death—and the brave man makes his mighty leap.

Even as he does so, he sees that he must fail—that he will fall several feet short and be dashed against the side of the building with his precious burden. So too the spellbound spectators realize, and shudder with horror. But in that supreme moment he makes a mighty effort to save the maiden. With superhuman strength he casts her from his arms—then strikes the building and falls to the street with crushing force—but alone!

“There is no earthly hope? The fiat has gone forth, and my hours of life are numbered?”

The speaker is lying upon a low couch, his form swathed in bandages from head to foot. Of all his person but one eye is visible, large, blue and lustrous, now fixed upon the face of the physician who stands beside him.

The latter hesitates to reply, and the invalid speaks again:

“On your honor as a surgeon, tell me the truth. Why should you hesitate? Think you I am afraid to bear my death sentence pronounced? To live a cripple—an object so scarred and deformed as to awaken horror and disgust in the gentlest breast—is that anything to hope or long for? I do not ask you through love of life or fear of death, but because I wish to set my house in order before I die.”

“You may live the day out—possibly a week, by a miracle—but death is inevitable, and may come at any moment,” slowly responded the medical man.

“Can you insure me an hour more of life?”

“With stimulants, and under Heaven, yes.”

“That will do. Be kind enough to ring the bell and tell the servant that I am ready.”

The words came fainter and with evident pain. The doctor pauses before touching the bell to administer some cordial, then gives the message to the servant.

In a few moments the door opens, and several persons enter the room, all grave, one with a tearful face.

The muffled form upon the couch speaks again.

“Tell them what you told me, doctor.”

With more fluency the skillful surgeon repeats his fiat. His patient lies at death’s door. It is a miracle that he has lived so long—that he ever drew a breath of life after that terrible fall—but he must die before that day is spent.

Low, choking sobs came from the maiden. A

look of deep, almost unearthly love fills that one blue eye.

“Compose yourself, Miranda,” softly uttered the helpless man. “I was enabled to save your life—for me, it matters little. I leave none behind me to grieve over my fate—those in whose veins my kindred blood flows will rather dance above my grave—unless you help me to thwart them.”

“You are hastening your death by speaking—”

“You are pledged to give me an hour’s lease of life, and I ask for no more than that. Senor Remirez, you have spoken to your daughter?”

“Yes; her will is mine and yours,” quickly responds a tall, dark, middle-aged man.

“I would not ask such a sacrifice, . . . here remained the faintest hope of my living. As it is, I can give her all my wealth and a name that I at least have borne pure and unsullied as it descended to me. I—I can say no more now. From my papers you will learn all.”

Fainter and fainter grows his speech. With an anxious countenance the doctor kneels beside him and administers restoratives. For several minutes all is suspense; then the large blue eye opens once more, and the feeble voice says:

“At once—they must not triumph over me now!”

A strange scene—the wedding of a young girl almost a child, with one who lies upon his deathbed. Tears and sobs instead of smiles and blushes. All around grave and anxious faces, while the priest hastens through the marriage service. And when the last words are pronounced, the young bride sinks upon the arm of her father, a lifeless, unconscious burden.

“Take her away—come back as soon as you can—to witness my will,” panted the dying man.

Senor Remirez bears his daughter to the door of the chamber, and delivers her to the care of the matronly housekeeper. When he returns, a lawyer is writing rapidly.

The invalid has little to dictate. His lawyer is master of all details, and has prepared the body of the will beforehand. The necessary writing is soon done. The fair young bride is made mistress of all the riches of the man who so gallantly rescued her from impending death.

“Go, now,” breathes the invalid. “Send Miranda—my wife—to me. There are a few things she alone must know.”

“You must be quiet, or I cannot answer—”

“Nor need you, dear sir. My work on earth is done, and I can meet grim death now with a smile. I could have no more welcome guest, on my honor!”

Cheerful, almost gay as these words are, they send a chill of something close akin to horror over the hearts of his hearers, and knowing the uselessness of remonstrance, they silently file from the room.

Once again the door opens, and then is closed upon the form of the weeping, agitated bride.

Wild and gloomy is the scene. Giant hills tower on every hand, rugged and rocky. From the distance comes the weird hoot of the horned owl—the lugubrious howling of a wolf—the angry cry of the mountain lion.

The full moon looks down upon a sight that might well cause her to vail her face behind the slowly drifting clouds.

A faintly worn trail winds through the valley. Besides this bubbles up a spring of water, around which the green grass grows short and thick. Near the spring smolder the embers of a camp-fire. To the left of this are seated two human figures. Between them lies a smooth, flat rock.

One is the figure of a woman, young and rarely beautiful despite the unearthly pallor of her countenance. She is richly dressed. The moonbeams are reflected back from the rings upon her fingers, the pin at her throat, the jewels in her profuse black hair.

The other is a man, young and shapely, neatly dressed though his garb is more in keeping with their surroundings, being of buckskin. His head, like hers, is bare.

Upon the stone between them, stands a crucifix, rudely fashioned out of two unbarked sticks.

Their elbows rest upon the stone, and their hands are joined over something that bears the semblance of a book. It is a book—a copy of the Holy Bible.

For hours they have been sitting thus, neither one speaking, neither one moving, their wide-open eyes riveted upon each other's face. The wolf howls nearer, the cry of the mountain lion echoes from the valley only a short distance away. Yet neither one moves or speaks.

Truly a strange silence, an unaccountable immobility!

The coals burst into a glow—the light shines upon the face of the man, revealing streaks of dull red—of blood!

Merciful heavens! it is the stillness of death!

CHAPTER I.

THE HOSTESS OF THE "SPREAD EAGLE."

"THAR she lays—the liveliest, slap-upedst town in all 'Forny for miners!" and the burly, weather-beaten driver fixed one crooked eye upon the young man who helped him fill the box-seat, while the other wandered off over the head of his nigh leader and settled with an admiring look upon the cluster of houses that nestled so easily in the valley below.

"Celestial City, you mean?"

"I do, fer a fact. An' I reckon when old Gabriel toots his trumpet fer the end o' the world, them as engineers the big show'll jist lift the hull town as she stan's an' plant her keerfully in some snug corner o' the garden o' glory—they will ef they're wise, fer I don't reckon they could improve much on that burg—no, sir!"

"Men and women and all?" smiled the young man.

"Mebbe a few two-legged critters could be sifted out as they kerried the town up, but not many. It's a clean town, an' mighty clean humans live thar. Stranger, ef you count on stayin' thar long, an' want ter 'joy the comforts o' life, putt up at the Spread Eagle. Thar's the purtiest landlady, the ugliest hunchback landlord, an' the best whisky in seventeen States. Gee up thar, Turtle dove! Stranger, hang on by your eyebrows, now, an' don't draw a lop-

sided breath, or over we go to glory or t'other place!"

The whip cracked, the horses started, the coach plunged forward until it seemed as though it must topple over upon the horses—then a minute or two of breathless suspense where each second appeared an eternity, after which the stage-coach rolled steadily over the level of the beautiful valley.

"I've traveled that Devil's Stairway nigh onto a thousand times, an' never hed a slip nur a bu'st-up," said the driver with a long breath as he twisted one crooked eye over his shoulder to survey the perilous course down which they had torn, "but each time I make my will an' kin feel the pin-feathers o' glory a-sproutin' on my shoulder-blades."

"We made good time, but nervous travelers might prefer more caution, even at the cost of speed."

"Two greenhorn drivers from the flat country tried that idee—you kin read o' thar vartues on the slab tombstones over yender in the bone-yard. They didn't know the fu'st rule o' mountain drivin': keep your hosses ahead o' the hearse, even though ye hev to load 'em up in a cannon an' shoot 'em off afore ye start the wheels. They trusted to the brake an' ribbons an' breast-chains—then went to glory in a heap! But yar we be—Celestial City, stranger! Ain't it a sight fer sore eyes?"

There was no response, for just then the coach drew up before the post-office, and a cry of mingled wonder and delight from lounging miners greeted the outside traveler.

"Walt Weston, by all that's holy!"

"Is it possible—you here, Tom Pierson!"

Lightly the young man leaped to the ground, and the two long-severed friends clasped hands, the moisture of genuine delight dimming the brightness of their eyes.

These chance meetings were too common in the land of gold for this one to attract much attention, but Walter Weston caught one pair of eyes watching them closely, even eagerly—evil eyes in an evil face, and though their owner turned abruptly away as he saw that his regards were noticed, the young man felt that he had made a false step at the very outset of his dangerous task.

"We can't talk here!" he said hurriedly. "Where do you stop?"

"At the Spread Eagle, of course," laughed Pierson. "But you are a stranger to Celestial City, and of course don't know—"

"About the prettiest landlady, to say nothing of the ugliest landlord!" laughed Weston. "Still the same slave to beauty as of old, Tom!"

"And you the same misogynist—but your time is come, old fellow. Ten to one that, inside of a week, you lay a captive at the feet of the fair Miranda. But come; even that dashing, handsome, cavalier face of yours may be unable to secure quarters at the Spread Eagle, unbacked by my influence."

Thus laughing and jesting, they passed up the street to where stood a large, two-story building. A short flight of steps led up to a broad veranda, surmounted by an arch on which perched a huge stuffed eagle, its broad pinions outspread as if in the act of taking wing. There was no other

sign, but this had been sufficient for the epithet-loving miners, and so the hotel was known far and wide as the Spread Eagle.

The spacious apartment, combining office, bar and sitting-room all in one, was almost deserted when the two friends entered it. Only two persons were there, and they so buried in conversation that the sound of footsteps passed unnoticed for the moment.

"Look your fill," whispered Pierson. "Did you ever set eyes upon a more bewilderingly fascinating woman?"

His words were scarcely exaggerated. Thoroughly under control as he had...ved his heart, Walter Weston felt its pulsations quicken and strengthen as he gazed upon the peerless beauty before him.

Printed words at best can give but a faint and unsatisfactory idea of a beautiful woman. They can say that her form was tall and admirably proportioned, each curve the perfection of lovely voluptuousness; that her hair, black as midnight, was luxuriant and soft as the finest spun silk; her eyes of jet were large and lustrous, now filling with a dreamy languor, swiftly changing with her varying emotions; could tell of her arched, scarlet lips, her dimpled chin, her queenly throat, her soft skin just touched with a creamy tint, a relic of the warm sun that shone upon the race of her forefathers—could say this, and more, yet fail in conveying more than a faint idea of the warm, living reality. Enough that Walter Weston, no mean judge of beauty, inwardly acknowledged that he had never before looked upon such a peerlessly beautiful woman.

She was seated within the inclosure, gracefully leaning upon the low counter, her profile turned toward the door. Opposite her, and also leaning, stood a young man, his large eyes fixed upon her face with bold admiration. His dress was rich for such an out-of-the-way place, but of too flashy material to be in good taste. There were rings upon his white hands, jewels in his spotless linen, and a heavy gold chain crossing his vest.

Gambler and sport; so Weston decided, and correctly. Louis Rippel had a widely extended and not too savory reputation as an expert card-player who was not above aiding fortune by sleight of hand where the risk of so doing was not too great. Many a time and oft had he been politely but firmly invited to leave a town for that town's good, and though Celestial City was not celebrated for the strictness of its morals, hints had already been given that the accomplished sport was lingering too long in that neighborhood for the good of his constitution.

Tom Pierson coughed shortly, and the interesting tableau was instantly dissolved. The woman started up, the flush fading from her cheek, a look of fear coming into her dark eyes. The gambler wheeled sharply, his right hand moving swiftly to his hip as though in quest of a weapon, but as they recognized the young miner, their composure instantly returned.

Swift as the change was, and sweet as was the smile with which the landlady greeted them, it produced a disagreeable effect upon Walter Weston. The soul of honor himself, he

could not condone the suspicion of wrong or deceit in others.

A room was quickly secured, name registered, and then, lighting their cigars, his two friends settled themselves in chairs upon the cool veranda.

"What do you think of the fair Miranda—chief angel of all Celestial City?" laughingly added Pierson.

"Bad medicine," was the terse reply.

"In a limited sense, you are right," gravely responded Pierson. "An inordinate coquette, who can no more resist the temptation to cast sheep's eyes at the latest comer, or to make love to him furiously if he is passably good-looking, than a young duck can help taking to the water. It is second nature to them both, and is born in them. But a jealous husband accounts for that—one whose passionate love only inspires her with fear. It is no secret that he has warned Louis Rippel—yonder flashy rascal—to keep away from the house."

"For all that, the husband must be a meek, low-metaled fellow—"

"Look! yonder he comes now! Does that meet your idea?"

A form—it could scarcely be called that of a man or human being—came around the corner and slowly ascended the steps—a form such as the Bard of Avon might have had in his mind's eye when he drew the character of Sycorax's impish offspring; a form and face so grotesquely, weirdly horrible that its hideousness seemed that of some paralyzing nightmare, rather than of living, breathing humanity.

A frame that was bowed and distorted and crooked to one side; limbs even more crooked and warped; hands and face seamed and scarred, of a sickening purplish hue like underdone roast beef; a nose flattened and pressed against one cheek; a ghastly socket where the left eye should have been, and half of the upper lip on the same side missing, laying bare the strong white teeth and giving a fierce, wolfish look to the entire face, more horrible than words can picture. No hair grew upon that face, and though a few stray locks depended from beneath the hat he wore, it was plain that these belonged to a wig.

Of all, there was but one redeeming feature—an eye, large, beautifully blue, lustrous as that of a deer and almost as mournful in appearance.

All this Walter Weston took in at a glance, then averted his eyes with a shudder of disgust, for never before had he looked upon living thing so utterly hideous.

Slight as was the motion, the new-comer noticed it, and a harder light came into his one eye as he respectfully touched his hat in answer to the young miner's nod.

"Hark!" exclaimed Pierson as this human monstrosity disappeared within the building. "There'll be music, now."

A faint cry came from within—the startled scream of a woman.

Walter Weston leaped to his feet, but Pierson caught his arm, hurriedly uttering:

"It is not our quarrel—we have no right to interfere in a family matinee like this—"

He said no more, for there came another in-

terrupting scream, this time so full of fear or horror that both young men leaped to the nearest window.

They saw the gambler reeling away from the bar like a drunken man and fall at full length upon the floor. But with a snarling curse, he partially lifted himself, a deadly weapon glittering in his right hand, the muzzle turned upon the human monstrosity, who seemed unconscious of his danger as he spoke rapidly to the woman.

"Look out, Cale!" shouted Pierson, nimbly leaping in through the window, closely followed by Weston.

The landlord wheeled swiftly at the warning which undoubtedly saved his life, for the heavy ball from the large-bored derringer plowed through his cheek instead of piercing his brain.

A sound, half-curse, half-laugh of bitter scorn, burst from his lips as one active leap carried him beside the gambler who was scrambling to his feet.

"You've had your warning, Louis Rippel—now take the penalty!" he exclaimed, one hand closing upon the gambler's throat.

His right fist was drawn back, then shot forward with a terrible force. A sickening *thud* followed, and the sport was knocked half-way across the room, where he lay quivering convulsively, his handsome face one mask of blood.

The landlord strode toward him, and fearing the worst, Weston made a step forward to interfere, but a little hand clung convulsively to his arm, and the woman gasped:

"Save me—protect me against him!"

A hard, grating laugh came from the landlord as he bent over his fallen foe, then he raised the unconscious form in his knotted arms, handling it as though a feather weight.

"Easy, old man!" cried Tom Pierson, as the deformed giant raised the limp form above his head and shook it like a cat playing with a mouse. "He's got enough for one dose."

A short, bitter laugh was the only sign that the landlord of the Spread Eagle heard this appeal. He strode to the door, still holding the senseless gambler in mid-air, then tossed the body down the flight of steps to the street.

The sobbing woman was still clinging to Walter Weston, incoherently begging him to protect her, and when the landlord turned toward them, she clung still more closely.

A strange expression flitted over the blood-stained face of the hunchback as he noted her attitude. A sardonic smile lent a still more wolfish look to his exposed teeth, and young Weston mechanically braced himself for the struggle which he felt was inevitable, at the same time trying to free his arm from the woman's grasp.

"Save me! For the love of Heaven, senor, do not abandon me to his horrible rage!"

"Peace—he shall not harm you while I can stand between," hurriedly assured Weston.

A harsh laugh came from between those gleaming teeth.

"You also, young sir? Well, one more or less, what matter? Miranda, release the gentleman's arm."

"Remember, she is a woman—"

"There is no foundation for her fear, nor for

yours, sir. I love her too wholly to ever injure one hair of her head—worse luck for me!"

CHAPTER II.

WHO IS CROOKED CALE?

THERE was an intensity of love, mingled with bitter despair, in these words, that seemed to terrify the fair wife more than his fury, and releasing Weston's arm, she fled from the room.

"Come, gentlemen," interposed Pierson, "you are both good friends of mine, and must be equally as good friends of each other—as I am sure you will, when once fairly acquainted. Mr. Keystone—Mr. Weston. Come—shake hands: then, old friend, you'd better have that hole in your cheek looked to. It's an ugly hurt—"

"On an ugly bit of soil, why don't you add?"

"Simply because such a thought never entered my mind. I know the true heart that's hidden under the rough shell, and that's enough for me. Come," and Tom's hand was placed coaxingly on the deformed man's shoulder, "let the past bury itself. You gave that card sharp no more than his insolence deserved."

"Thanks; I believe you are really my friend, and so, if I may ask a favor—Your friend will have formed a queer opinion of—of us all, I am afraid, but I can trust you to set him aright!"

The two friends both wore grave and thoughtful faces as they resumed their seats upon the veranda.

"A strange being—yet who can wonder, considering what a terrible burden life must be to one so misshapen. And she so beautiful! Can it be possible that they are man and wife?" exclaimed Weston, curiously.

"Fast as the office of holy priest can make them! But the Hunchback of the Mines was not always as you see him now. I remember my father describing him as he was—the model of manly grace and beauty. He knew him well, and it was largely his surgical skill that nursed him back to life after that frightful accident—"

"Do you mean to say that he was thus crippled—thus horribly deformed by an accident—and yet lived? How tenaciously the poor fellow must have clung to life!"

"Just the contrary—he tried hard to die, and it was only by the strictest care and vigilance through a whole year that he was kept from smothering his feeble remnant of life—not until an always passionate love grew so intense that he felt life was worth living, even as a human monstrosity. But let me tell you his story—the most pathetic I ever knew in real life."

"From his very birth Caleb Keystone seemed set apart as a mark for fortune's most spiteful darts. Those who should have been his best and truest friends, from the kindred blood that flowed in their veins, proved his worst and most persistent enemies. It would be too long a story to tell it all—though I could, for often have I listened to father repeat it from beginning to end—but it is enough to say that all his kindred—even his mother and father—turned against Caleb, for no particular fault of his own, and hunted him almost to his grave."

"He fought his own way through it all, and outwardly was a blithe, happy, prosperous merchant, but deep down in his heart he carried a

wound that rankled even more painfully than did the unnatural conduct of his parents.

"There was a woman at the bottom of it, of course. My father knew her well, and from his account, she must have been the very moral of what her daughter is now—equally as beautiful, as great a coquette, with quite as small a heart."

"You mean Mrs. Keystone?"

"The lovely Miranda—yes. The poor hunchback lost the mother, but gained the daughter—better far for him had he never met either!"

"She was a widow then, with this one child—her image in miniature. Spanish, fond of finery, excitement, and above all, flirting. Caleb was her slave. He was not so rich, then, but he lavished all upon her, and she promised to marry him. Doubtless she meant it, too—until another and richer man came along and caught her fancy. They were married before Caleb Keystone suspected anything, and how terrible a blow it was to him, no man save my father ever knew."

"For months he lay at death's door, but then he arose, the ghost of his former self. He made no loud complaint. He met the woman who had thrown him over, and proved the truest friend she ever had."

"The husband, Senor Remirez, proved a gambler sailing under false colors, and inside of a year, the family was almost wholly supported by the rejected lover. There is little doubt but what he could have had ample revenge on the man who had supplanted him, but his love was too pure for that."

"Then Madame Remirez died. Time passed on, and little Miranda living with her father and grandfather, grew more lovely and more like her dead mother. And Caleb, though double her age, began to feel more than a paternal love for the dainty beauty."

"At length his business called him from the city, and he was gone for several months. Before he went, he left a large sum with Senor Remirez but that was all lost at cards the same week, and the family removed to one of the largest tenement-houses until their banker could return home."

"He came—in a most unlucky hour. He heard the bells ringing for a great fire, and bitter fate in the guise of curiosity, led him to the scene. Almost the first sight that met his gaze, was Miranda, standing at a window of the fourth story, holding the head of her old grandfather to her breast, piteously calling for aid."

In glowing, earnest speech, that told how deeply he felt the tragic misfortune of his friend, the young miner told of the daring rescue, the frightful leap for life and its terrible consequences. For this, and the strange wedding which followed, a backward glance at the prologue will suffice.

"It was a wonderful cure," continued Person, "and proved the apex of my father's fame as a surgeon and physician, for hardly a whole bone remained in poor Caleb's body—but great as was the tribute to his skill, more than once I have heard father regret that he had not failed, for the poor fellow's own sake. If ever mortal man endured the torments of hell on earth, Caleb Keystone was that wretch."

"For long months, no one, unless it was my father, even suspected what a horrible change there would be between the former Caleb and the present. All knew, of course, that one eye was gone, and that his figure would always be deformed, but the worst was hidden by the bandages which enveloped him from top to toe."

"During this time, Miranda was a model of tender care and solicitude. She had ever been fond in a childish way of the handsome Hercules who could never pet her enough, and this, added to the arts of her money-loving step-father, kept her constant longer than she ever was before or since. So, day by day, poor Caleb learned to love the child—she was only fifteen, then—until his whole soul was bound up in hers. Her soft tenderness encouraged him to believe that some day his powerful love would gain hers, and instead of longing to die, he prayed to live to make her happy. From that day he grew rapidly stronger."

"The tears would fill my father's eyes whenever he spoke about the dumb horror and unutterable disgust which came into the eyes of the young wife when she first beheld her husband arise from his bed and stand before her, his terrible deformity fully revealed. Tears, not for her, but him—as the poor fellow read the truth in her pale abhorrent countenance. He had been so proud of his returning strength, and in his all-absorbing love for her, had hardly noticed his own deformity. He had planned this as a joyful surprise to his girl wife, but instead of the expected joy—Heaven help him! he knew now what he was, and, worse than all, knew how his wife regarded him."

"Miranda and her father were like two leeches; she plunged into every extravagance that money could gratify, be at the card-table, and in two years, though he worked night and day for her sake, Caleb Keystone was a ruined man."

"They left New Orleans, and the world lost sight of them. Last year I came to this place, and though I had never met them before, I recognized them at once. But Caleb is greatly changed from the weak, long-suffering man whom my father knew. Though his love for her could not well have been stronger, he has taught her the meaning of fear, but she will never be other than a shallow, heartless coquette!"

"Unless I read the man wrongly, she will one day go a step too far," thoughtfully observed Weston. "And if ever his rage does turn against her, the result will be fearful!"

"I hardly think that. The woman absolutely has no heart, and is too proud of her beauty to suffer animal passion to carry her over the boundary. Then Crooked Cale—so people call him here, and sometimes, thanks to a witty fellow whose memory recalled Shakespeare's 'Tempest' on hearing his name, the Caliban of Celestial City—is pretty well known as 'a bad man,' who is quick on the trigger and ready to fight at the drop of a hat."

From down the street came a loud, prolonged bellow, more like that of a routing bull than aught from human lungs, followed by a shrill cock-crow.

"Some two-legged whisky-skin proclaiming himself chief, I suppose," laughed Weston, while

a frown wrinkled the brow of his friend. "The stage-driver assured me that I would find Celestial City a very lively place, and I begin to think he told the truth."

"That's Bill Baxter—'Patchie Bill he calls himself—an infernal, gasconading nuisance!" Tom.

CHAPTER III.

"'PATCHIE BILL, THE INJUN-EATER."

"CL'AR the track, fer I'm a-comin'—'Patchie Bill, the Injun-Eater—head up an' tail a-risin'! Whoo-ee!"

A prolonged yell that sounded like the blare of a cracked fog-horn, terminated the unique challenge, and a moment later the redoubtable bully of the town made his appearance around the corner, followed at a respectful distance by a few rough and ragged satellites, who greeted his fantastic words and gyrations with admiring comments and flattering laughter.

"Rip shins an' marrerbones! Wake snakes, the winter's bu'sted wide open! an' yer' I come, a-r'arin', t'arin', howlin', foamin' freshet o' 'tarnal death an' 'struction! Bank full an' still a-boomin'! Sand in my teeth an' driftwood fer ha'r! Whar's the two-legged rock that kin split my current wide open? Whar is he—whar is he?"

"Too much foam and empty sound there," quietly observed Weston, as the "Injun-Eater" leaped high into the air and cracked his heels together before emitting another ear-splitting screech.

"Just my opinion, but the fellow's big talk and ugly looks have so far bluffed off everybody who had any pretensions to the chief ship of the town—By George! I believe the scoundrel means to pick a quarrel with one of us!"

"Keep your seat," and Weston laid a restraining hand on the arm of his friend and held him motionless. "You're right, I dare say, but let's hear what the gentleman has to say for himself."

They were not kept long in waiting. The bully, as though he had just caught sight of them, advanced rapidly until opposite their position, then squared himself, his feet widely planted, his arms akimbo, his head cocked on one side, with his chin thrust out as he fixed his bleared and bloodshot eyes upon the stranger with an insolent stare.

A smile of amused contempt curled Weston's lip as he ran his eye over the fellow—a nondescript creature such as only the wild West could have produced or tolerated.

He was a stout, bull-headed, broad-shouldered, bandy-legged, clumsy-looking rascal, clad in a red flannel shirt, open in front nearly to the waist, exposing a hairy and not too clean chest, greasy buckskin pantaloons tucked into the tops of badly-battered horse-hide boots. A ragged red handkerchief was turned turban-like around his head, from beneath which, tangled locks of Indian-like hair depended in snaky strings. A bristling beard covered his face to his eyes; these, with his swollen, rum-blossoming nose, betrayed an intimate acquaintance with the liquid lightning of Celestial City.

A broad belt encircled his waist, and was literally filled with weapons; two braces of re-

volvers and half that number of huge butcher-knives.

"Whar's the two-legged man-mountain that traveled all the way from Oroville jist to chaw me into shoe-strings? Stranger, is you the critter?"

"I hail from Oroville—yes," coolly replied Weston.

"The king-bird o' Placer county—high-muck-a-muck o' the Sacramento—big fightin' chief o' the Feather River diggings, ain't ye? Come up yer' to 'initiate us heathen into the mystifications o' rough-an'-tumble ology?"

"Not exactly. I came here on private business," replied Weston, but with a slight lowering of his eyebrows, as he recognized, in one of the bully's following, the evil-eyed fellow who had scrutinized him so closely when Tom Pierson called aloud his name before the post-office.

Pierson opened his eyes in amazement, for his friend did not use to quietly submit to insolence, but Weston tightened his grasp upon his arm with a meaning pressure.

The bully was clearly encouraged by the quiet disclaimer, and to complete the impression he had made, once more soared to the heights of loftiest hyperbole.

"Mebbe you never hearn tell of me, stranger—thar is critters that never see the sun nor moon, never hearn the tbunder 'n' lightnin' boom out ge'-long to the ram! Jist so thar may be some poor coots as never hearn tell o' 'Patchie Bill, the Injun-Eater, the bloody-mouthed b'ar o' the foot-hills—the rampin', screamin' mountain lion o' the morning star, an' the gully-whompin' catamount o' Bitter Creek—who-ee! The double-j'nted human machine what's chawed more red-skins to glory then'd make a carpet from this to Never-come-back-ag'in! 'Patchie Bill, the ontamed, double-jawed alligator an' moss-backed terrapin jest from the bowels o' the Black Swamp—*whoo-EE!*"

Again that shrill, unearthly yell, in imitation of an infuriated stallion, and the Injun-Eater struck the ground violently with his hoof, his cheeks swelling out like hairy puff-balls as he stared insolently at the occupants of the chairs on the veranda.

Tom Pierson looked hot and uncomfortable, but with that firm grasp upon his arm he managed to keep his seat.

A faint smile curled the lips of Weston as he lazily regarded the ridiculous attitude of the gasconading bully, but he said nothing, and the Injun-Eater burst forth anew:

"You hear me belch—'Patchie Bill the Injun-Eater! When I breathe, it makes a harrycane, an' when I stamp my foot it makes yearth-quakes that shakes the pig-tails off'm the Johns onderneath! When I blow my nose it brings on a thunder storm—when I chomp my teeth the snow flies, an' ef I happen to look crossways, chain-lightning bu'sts things wide open! Them's me, 'Patchie Bill, the Injun-Eater—cocked an' primed an' triggers sprung—grim death an' massacreation! Cl'ar the tanyard an' fetch on a rijiment o' your biggest an' toploftiest foughters—set 'em up afore me an' see me go through 'em like a whirlygust o' woopeckers through a cherry-tree! *Whoo-ee!*"

He cut a few clumsy capers, and as the approving laughter of his obsequious followers rung out, the blustering fellow became more pointed in his remarks.

"I hearn they was a boss fighter come to town, jist fer to kerry back my skelp to his sweetheart, but 'pears like somebody told a lie. Not that I keer a dried-apple durn, only I hain't felt a breeze fer so long that I don't know how it'd feel. Jest to keep from gittin' too rusty, I swallered a cyclone fer dinner an' chawed up a powder-mill fer lunch, then moseyed up here fer to git a squar' meel off o' the boss fighter's alabaster ear! Come an' see me, stranger! I'm the man kin lick seventeen kinds o' stuffin' out o'—"

"You couldn't whip one side of a blind cripple with the paralysis!" came a sharp, contemptuous voice that cut the braggart's speech short and drew all eyes toward the doorway of the Spread Eagle.

Crooked Cale, the hunchback, stood there, his face freshly bound with strips of court-plaster, a burning light in his eye.

"What does all this howling mean, anyway?" he demanded.

"Some o' the boys told me they was a boss fightin' cock come in on the stage as made his brags he could jest everlastin'ly git away with my apple-cart, so I jest piked over here to take a look at the rooster," the Injun-Eater replied, in a greatly moderated tone.

"Well, 'Patchie Bill, Injun-Eater, as you proclaim your title, I want you to understand this: I do the fighting for this establishment, and though I should hate to dirty my hands with such a rascal, if you are really spoiling for a muss, you can have it on your own terms, tooth and toe-nail, knife and skull-splitter, or pepperbox and blunderbuss!"

"Ef the gen'leman says—" hesitated the bully.

"The gentleman says nothing to such as you," sharply interrupted Crooked Cale. "Take up your foot and travel, or you'll get your comb cut so close you won't be able to crow again for a month of Sundays. And mind you—I run the Spread Eagle, and if you or any of your kidney dare come here again to pick a quarrel with any of my guests, I'll wear you out against the ground—mind that."

As he spoke, Crooked Cale made a step forward, but the bully did not remain to meet him. With a half-defiant laugh he turned away, muttering:

"I kin eat a Injun or swaller a Christian, but durned ef I kin stan' a two-legged horn-toad—no, sir!"

Crooked Cale laughed contemptuously, then turned toward the two friends, his voice soft and mellow, his tones polite.

"I ask your pardon, Mr. Weston, if I have been too officious, but I watched your face for a moment through the window, and thought you had some strong reasons for not wishing to punish that rascal as his insolence deserved."

"So I had—and not exactly personal fear, either," laughed the young man.

"No need of assurance on that point," quickly uttered the landlord. "I am a good judge of character through one's face, and I saw that

much. Had I thought you were kept quiet by fear, I should not have interfered; but I knew some powerful motive underlay all. Mind; I'm not fishing for information. Your secret business is no concern of mine. But it can do no harm for you to be on your guard. Bully Bill did not come here of his own accord—he is not so apt to tackle strangers until he has had time to sound the way and assure himself that he can do so without too much danger—"

"You are a close observer, Mr. Keystone," smilingly interrupted Weston. "But may I ask why you think I am other than a simple prospector looking for a paying lead?"

"The Sheriff of Placer County could have found that nearer home. You see, your fame and name have reached this far."

"The name is plainly written on your register—"

"But would it have appeared there, had not Mr. Pierson recognized you and shouted out your name before you left the coach?" retorted Crooked Cale.

"Why not?" demanded Weston, his brows contracting.

"That is none of my business, as no doubt you are thinking at this moment—nor is it, apart from the interest I, as an honest man, feel in the welfare of justice and its officials. I only say this as a hint that may serve you. What I saw, others saw."

"And that was—"

"You were glad to see your friend, but you frowned when he uttered your name, and cast a quick glance around to see if any one had noticed it. You saw one who had—Simon Quirk—and you knew that he had heard of you before. That same rascal was here with Bill Baxter—"

"I saw him, both there and here; a thorough-paced rascal."

"And one far more dangerous than 'Patchie Bill, for all he looks so mean and insignificant. The one *talks*, the other *acts*. He, or may be those higher in authority behind him, set Bill on to draw you into a street fight. Bill is looked on by many as invincible in that line, though his reputation has been wholly won by loud talk and boasting. He has never had a turn up with any one yet in this town, though half the population fear him as they would the plague."

"You are not of that number," laughed Weston.

"No; I never was much of a coward, even when I had all to live for; now—I have only life, and you can guess how highly I estimate that."

With a hoarse laugh, Crooked Cale turned abruptly away and re-entered the hotel.

"Poor devil! it must be a perfect death-in-life sort of existence for him," muttered Weston, pity in his tones.

"A hideous shell, but it covers a heart of gold!" earnestly responded Pierson. "Had there been a trace of evil in his heart, he must have been transformed into a veritable fiend long ere this. At first, even while knowing his sad story, I could not look upon him without a shudder, but now I almost love—certainly honor and respect him."

"He is a very close reasoner."

"Yes, and you can depend on his judgment. I am sorry I bailed you as I did, if he is right—"

"He was right, and I'm afraid I'll have my hands full before I can accomplish what I came here for—Hello! what's stung you now?" he cried, as Pierson leaped to his feet, a sharp, angry curse parting his lips.

"That infernal scoundrel! I'll kill the impudent hound!"

Weston followed the direction of his friend's glare, and there he beheld 'Patchie Bill, the Injun-Eater, in a new *role*.

CHAPTER IV.

THE "INJUN-EATER'S" WOOING.

'PATCHIE BILL was much quieter and had a great deal less to say for himself than usual when he and his rough cohort turned their backs on the Spread Eagle and its belligerent host, Crooked Cale. He knew that he had shown the white feather unmistakably, and knew that those now with him, friends and admirers as they professed themselves, would lose no time in spreading the news, no doubt with racy additions. He was gifted with a certain coarse cunning, and realized how frail were the foundations on which rested his claims to the proud title of "chief." That dizzy altitude is seldom maintained for any length of time by one man. There are always plenty of aspirants for the lofty title, and let the chief meet with ever so slight a reverse, the boldest among these ambitious candidates for popular worship are pretty sure to measure their strength against his prowess.

It was these reflections that put a bridle on the tongue of the Injun-Eater, and brought an uglier light into his bleared and bloodshot eyes as he beat a retreat up the street. He did not fear a rival rising among those who followed him now. He knew that they were a cowardly lot, bold enough, some of them, to strike an enemy in the back with a silent knife when the gloom of night afforded them a safe cover under which to advance and flee, but they were not the metal out of which even a spurious chief might be made. Knowing this, and knowing, too, that any one of them would not hesitate to snap at his haunches if they thought they could escape being crushed by his heavy heel, Bill glared at them venomously to discover the first signs of merriment of his expense. In fact, so disagreeably ferocious were his scowls and frowns and other distortions of his countenance, that one by one his following dropped off and skurried away before he should annihilate them, leaving him alone with Simon Quirk, an evil-eyed, black-browed, withered-looking sinner.

'Patchie Bill abruptly halted and stared at his mate.

"Dad sampled ef I kin do it! Looks too much like runnin' away. Back I go, an' mop up the ground with that twistificated dogger-type of a night-hoss tell he cain't tell t'other from which! Kin I let it be said that the crooked cuss exflunctified 'Patchie Bill, the Injun-Eater, in a squabification? Grim death an' massacreeation!"

His cheeks swelled, his eyes rolled wildly,

and a richer tint crept over the end of his carbuncled nose as he confronted the dried-up little rascal with this explosion.

Simon Quirk was no fool, and not easily imposed upon. For a moment he hesitated, his evil eyes twinkling maliciously, and 'Patchie Bill began to fear that he had once more over-shot his mark. Luckily for his remnant of credit, Quirk always placed business before pleasure. 'Patchie Bill had a part to play, and until that was ended he must be kept in hand.

"Crooked Cale will keep, mate—don't be in such a rush. You've acted tip-top so far for such a ferocious fire-eater; don't spoil everything now."

"But the boys'll say I crawfished—that I tuck water when that crumpled-up runt o' ugly p'izen on two legs flirted his flag in my face," demurred Bill.

"Let them say—you can have the fun of whipping them one after the other or all in a heap, and thus clear your character," added Simon, sober as a deacon. "What else could you do? You were under orders. Those orders were to draw Walter Weston, Sheriff of Placer County, out of his shell and chaw him up, but not to show your hand too plainly. You were naturally curious, as chief of Celestial City, to take the measure of each new-comer. If you could get Weston to dispute your title, that was all right. Beyond that, your orders would not let you go. Crooked Cale was not in the bargain. If you had mixed him up in it, who knows but the plans of the boss might have been ruined? No; old man; don't be to brash. Wait until you are off duty, then you can go for that two-legged crab, red-hot!"

"An' ef I don't crack his shell skientifically, you kin jist chew my alabaster ear fer pig souse!" earnestly declared the Injun-Eater, once more himself. "You'll set it right afore the boss? Tell him 'twas all I could do to keep from bu'stin' the breechin' an' crawlin' all over the gully-whompin' hunchupper."

"He shall hear the whole truth, never fear. Be sure you are on deck if wanted. The boss won't give it up so easy, and you may have to try your hand again."

Simon Quirk turned abruptly away as though fearful the swelling bully should read the truth in his malicious eyes, while Bully Bill, in far better humor with himself, turned in the opposite direction.

True, he could not help knowing that he was an arrant coward, liable at any moment to have his borrowed plumes stripped off, but the well-chosen words of Simon Quirk gave him fresh hopes of staving off the evil hour, perhaps forever. The greatest coward is a brave man until those around him can see beneath his mask.

That afternoon was destined to be an eventful one to the redoubtable Injun-Eater. He had barely parted with Simon Quirk when he saw and recognized an approaching figure—a soberly clad and closely veiled woman.

A glowing light leaped into his red eyes, and his thick lips closed and parted with an unctuous smack.

"The little schoolma'am! Dad-sampled ef I don't hev some fun!"

Enough has already been said to show that the Injun-Eater was not troubled with over modesty, and now that he felt sure there was no personal danger to fear, he was bold as a lion.

The approaching lady evidently did not notice him through her thick veil until they were only separated by a few yards, for then she hesitated and glanced quickly around as though meditating retreat. If this was the case, she was not given an opportunity of putting the idea into execution, for Bully Bill advanced rapidly and fairly blocked the passage.

"Angelliferous madame, the sight o' you is good for sore eyes!" he exclaimed, bowing and scraping with ludicrous politeness, as the lady suddenly recoiled a pace. "I was jest thinkin' o' you—deed, it's pesky few minutes in the long day that I ain't thinkin' o' thee, sweetness, fer in the middle o' my heart o' hearts your dogger-type is printed deep an' cl'ar as the foot of a duck in a mudpuddle—"

"Stand aside and let me pass on, sir!"

Sharp and clear the words were uttered, with more of impatient anger in the tones than of fear, yet the speaker shrank back as the half drunken bully came closer.

"Thar's mud to either side of us, pritty, an' as I got a 'pointment fer a high-toned ball this evenin', you wouldn't ax me fer to ruinate my best dancin' pumps, would ye? Now ef you ain't too ticklish in the short ribs, an' I'll promise not to kick an' squeal out loud, I kin lift ye up over my head or else turn around an' set ye down in the path ahind me—"

"Thank you—I'd prefer retracing my steps altogether," sharply and sourly retorted the schoolma'am.

"Twon't do ye the least bit o' good to run," grinned the bully, as she half turned about. "I'd be after ye like a whirlygust o' wood-peckers chasin' a hoppergrass, an' as my pa'r o' forks is the longest, you'd git clean run over, shure!"

The schoolma'am glanced around her irresolutely. Not another living soul was to be seen, else her course would have been clear. A single cry for help would be sufficient, for whatever other points there might be doubts concerning, her immense popularity among the miners of Celestial City was beyond question.

Nearly a year before this date, she entered town by the Southern stage and put up at the Spread Eagle, registering her name as Miss Mary Truhart. She was young and fair, but by no means such a bewildering, dazzling beauty as Miranda Keystone. The latter feared no future rival in her, and the twain soon became great friends.

Miss Mary soon told her story; short and pathetic. Cast down from affluence to penury, her friends thus lost, her relatives swept away by an epidemic, her lover proving false—she had wandered toward the setting sun in hopes of finding oblivion. But now—she was penniless; she was too proud to accept alms—she must work for her living; she had a good education—could she not start a school, and thus drive the wolf from her door?

To use the vernacular, in those chivalric days, women in the land of gold "had a mighty soft

thing of it," especially if said woman was passably fair and undoubtedly respectable. So the word was scarcely more than spoken before there was a comfortable school-house being run up, and Miss Mary's list of scholars filled up as fast as she could put down their names. It was curious how many illiterate young men—and some no longer young—there were in Celestial City, the center of the mining district, who were crazy to learn; or would have been curious had Miss Mary Truhart been an ancient, vinegary old maid instead of such a trim, plump, huggable lump of humanity as she was.

Somehow this was the impression she left upon her adorers, and yet, if brought under the rule she would have measured several inches over the medium height of woman, and to a stranger, her superb figure, straight, erectly borne and elastic, would have been deemed haughty rather than otherwise.

Her hair was brown, and worn in curling rings and waves around her head, almost boyish fashion. Her eyes were large, deep gray, and, while seeming innocence personified, were past masters in the art of language without words. Her face was oval, her skin clear and creamy, her teeth good, her lips red and soft, while there was just the faintest shadow along her upper lip. Her form was good, well-rounded and developed, but the schoolma'am, either from economy or good taste, dressed very plainly, wearing no ornaments save a spray of green or a bright flower at her throat.

From the very first, the schoolma'am could almost have taken her choice of every single man in Celestial City. She trod on bleeding hearts at every step she took. Two young men could hardly meet and pass each other without showing their teeth and scowling, while nearly every day there were collisions between would-be rivals on her account. But of these the fair Mary took no account save to treat the battered champions more coldly than ever, until they grew tired of spilling their blood in a fruitless cause. Yet hardly a man in all the town but would have unhesitatingly laid down his life in her defense.

The Injun-Eater readily divined the meaning of that glance, and though there was no one in sight, a single scream for help might bring a score of hardy champions to the rescue.

"Bless ye, honey-bird, don't look so indignant—sure, you ought'a' knowed I was only funnin'," he hastened to say, in an offensively familiar tone, but moving aside so that she could pass by him dry-shod. "Ruther then ye should run the resk o' gittin' yer dainty ten toes dirty, I'd lay right down an' let ye make a footbridge o' my karkass—I would so!"

The schoolma'am made no reply but brushed quickly past the fellow, who, however, was not to be so easily shaken off.

"Grim death an' massacreeation! angelliferous madam, don't be in sech a monstrous rush!" he exclaimed, keeping pace with her and bending over in an attempt to peer under her closely-drawn vail. "Good company ain't so plenty in this burgh that you need bump yourself so, fer to git away from the tip-top cream—if I do say it myself. You know me—'Patchie Bill,

the Injun-Eater an' chief o' Celestial City—built from the ground up, twenty feet in the cl'ar, 'thout knot-hole, wind crack or tetch o' dry-rot—yard wide an' all wool—pure, clean dust an' full weight—that's me!"

"You may be all you say, and even more, but what interest has it for me?" coldly uttered the schoolma'am.

"The intrust what a woman nat'ally feels consarnin' the good an' solid p'ints o' her futur' husban'—"

"Are you crazy, sir—or drunk?" she ejaculated.

"Crazy for love an' dead drunk on the same medicine!" frankly avowed Bill, plumping down upon his knees before the lady, his head cocked on one side, a maudlin smile wrinkling his flabby lips. "Angeliferous madam—"

He said no more. As though a double-thunderbolt had struck him, the Injun-Eater received a blow and a kick that sent him end over end from the path into the muddy ditch.

CHAPTER V.

THE INJUN-EATER "TAKES WATER."

IT was the sight of Billy Baxter plumping down on his knees before the veiled schoolma'am that so excited and enraged Tom Pierson. With the keen eye of a true lover he instantly recognized the lady, and instantly rushed to her rescue, closely followed by Walter Weston. But swift as were their footsteps, they were too late to clear the narrow path of the amorous bully.

An exclamation of wonder burst from Weston's lips, as he saw the Injun-Eater turn a complete back somerset, and alight on the broad of his back in the muddy ditch. He saw the swift stroke of a white fist administering a dexterous "upper cut," and beheld a neat, white-clothed ankle as a trim foot aided in the overthrow of the bully, but he could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes. What manner of woman was this, with the power and skill of a prize-fighter?

Pierson was not so critical, but he certainly was more wise or cunning, for almost before Miss Mary Truhart realized the approach of aid, he had her clasped in his strong arms, his lips suspiciously close to the veiled face.

"Has that scoundrel dared to harm or insult you?" he cried, lifting the veil and exposing the flushed countenance of the fair Amazon.

"Yes—no—he only—oh, I am so glad you chanced along, Mr. Pierson!" hysterically sobbed the schoolma'am, womanlike giving way as soon as the peril was over.

Tom's lips were very close to hers now, but that might have been because she seemed on the point of fainting, and he thought she could hear his words better at short range.

"I'll murder the scoundrel! To dare—insult you—my darling!" he uttered, between breaths, as it were.

This bit of by-play did not wholly escape the keen eyes of the sheriff, and he began to realize that his friend possessed another safeguard against the blandishments of the fair Miranda, aside from his respect for Crooked Cale, but his attention was mainly given to the Injun-Eater.

Trot Worthy had raised himself to a sitting posture in the mire, and was busily clawing

the mud from his eyes and mouth, uttering strange, barbarous oaths and exclamations.

The alarm had quickly spread, and a dozen men were then running to the spot, eager to see the "circus." The Injun-Eater heard the trampling of heavy feet, and scrambled up, glaring around him in mingled rage and bewilderment.

"Whar's the mule that kicked me?" he bellowed, swelling out his cheeks and snorting loudly through his nostrils.

A strong hand closed upon his shoulder like a vise, and the clear, stern voice of Walter Weston rung out:

"You contemptible scoundrel! You have basely insulted this lady, and now you shall beg her pardon on your knees!"

Until he spoke, the schoolma'am had remained quiescent in the arms of Tom Pierson, as though she rather liked the situation than otherwise, but at the sound of Weston's stern voice, her eyes opened and she uttered an involuntary exclamation.

Weston wheeled quickly, as though he thought he recognized the voice, and stood with widely opened eyes, staring upon the face of the pale schoolma'am as though a ghost of the dead past had suddenly risen up before him. But whatever the source of his emotion, it came near being his death.

Despite the mud in his eyes, Bully Bill recognized the owner of the hand upon his shoulder, and already mad with rage, he whipped forth a revolver and thrusting it fairly against the head of the sheriff, pulled trigger.

A warning cry from Crooked Cale who was pushing through the gathering crowd, but still more the sharp click of the revolver as its hammer was raised warned Weston of his peril, and ducking down his head as he turned, he shot out his fist with a lightning stroke, full in the stomach of the bully, sending him backward in a doubled-up heap once more into the ditch.

Even that lightning-like quickness would not have foiled the murderous attempt, but the cap failed to explode under the falling hammer.

An angry, threatening roar came from the crowd as they witnessed this dastardly attempt at murder, but Weston, now thoroughly aroused, raised his hand commandingly.

"Leave the fellow to me, gentlemen. This is my quarrel, and the man who interferes unasked becomes my enemy!"

By this time the Injun-Eater once more scrambled to his feet, though he stood with his back humped and both hands pressed upon his stomach, gasping for breath. He did not offer to leave the ditch, for he caught the ominous mutterings from the crowd, and his little stock of spirit, lent by anger, was fast oozing forth at his finger-ends.

"Make a ring and let them fight it out!" shouted a shrill voice from the outside of the crowd, and Weston's lip curled as he caught a brief glimpse of the speaker, Simon Quirk.

"You fellers is making a powerful squabblification 'bout nothin', 'pears to me," growled the crestfallen Injun-Eater.

"Is it nothing to insult a lady?" demanded Weston, sharply.

"Who did it? Me? The critter as says so kin

stretch a ounce o' truth enough to kiver the hull State o' Caleforny!" exclaimed Bill, in a tone of injured innocence. "Did I, angelferous madam? Didn't I ax you to marry me—"

"And I decline the honor," snapped the schoolma'am, dropping her vail and slipping out of the arms of Pierson.

"That settles it, then."

"Not until you get down on your marrow-bones and humbly beg Miss Truhart's pardon for daring to even think of her in connection with yourself," cried Tom Pierson.

"It's a durned impersition!" snarled the cornered bully. "A hull durned rigiment onto one man—"

"Fair play!" came the shrill voice of Simon Quirk, and the Injun-Eater felt a little less ill at ease as he heard several voices echo this popular sentiment, but sweeter far than all else were the words of the schoolma'am:

"I beg of you, gentlemen, to let the matter rest where it is," she exclaimed, imploringly. "It is all very disagreeable to a lady, and further agitation of it can only make it worse."

"You have the right to command us, lady," and Weston bowed low before the veiled figure.

Injun-Eater was not utterly devoid of wit, and fancying he saw a good chance to make a point with the crowd, jumped at the chance, and before any one could divine his intention, he dropped on one knee before Miss Truhart.

"Angelferous madam, what force couldn't do, your kindness bes pauned out. Hyer I kneel—'Patchie Bill, the Injun-Eater an' general glorificationer o' the fa'r sex in general an' your own purty self in 'ticklar—byar I kneel, an' humbly ax your pardon fer darin' to think o' love an' you an' myself together. Wipe your purty feet onto me. Make me a scrapin'-knife fer yer delicut hoofs. Use me fur a footstool or a bootjack—"

He ceased abruptly, for the schoolma'am, with a smothered laugh at his ridiculous words and corresponding gestures, turned away and disappeared amid the crowd. Bill, with a sickly grin, arose and glanced quickly around him. His heart felt lighter as he noticed the general look of good-humor upon the surrounding faces.

"A man what is ashamed fer to git down onto his hunkers to a lady like that splendiferous madam, ain't no man at all. I axed her would she hev me, an' she 'cluded she wouldn't. I hed the right to do the one an' she the other. We both used our right, and that settles the hull business!"

"Not quite," sharply interjected Weston. "You have left me out of the question altogether, and I object."

'Patchie Bill turned a sickly yellow through his beard and mud-blotches. There was something in the cold, composed tones and actions of this young stranger that awed him, and he inwardly cursed his amorous folly for having involved him in such an unpleasant scrape. But, coward as he was, he dared not show the white feather before such a crowd, after having so long lorded it over them as "chief," sole and undisputed.

"Ef the lady was satisfied, I don't see what call you've got to git your back up about it!" he snarled, viciously.

"We'll leave the lady out of the question, if you please," came the sharp reply. "I am acting for myself just now."

"Quit your quarreling and go to fighting!" came the shrill voice.

"If you are spoiling to see some fun, Simon Quirk, you needn't look any further!" cried out Crooked Cale, meaningly.

"Let the little rat squeak on!" laughed Weston.

"Look out, Walt!" cried Pierson, leaping forward, but his aid was not required.

A coward when fairly cornered is sometimes dangerous, and so it was with the Injun-Eater. He knew that he had some friends present on whom he believed he could depend, thanks to the bonds of mutual crime and interest, and knowing from the manner of Weston that he could not avoid a collision without fairly running away, he whipped forth a knife and made a desperate thrust at his adversary.

But the sheriff was not a man to fall into the same blunder a second time, and careless as he seemed to all outward appearance, not the slightest movement on the part of the Injun-Eater escaped his notice. It is true, he did not anticipate so venomous an attack, so soon after the ignominious failure of the first, expecting rather a stroke of the fist or a grapple, but none the less he was prepared when it did come, swaying his lithe body swiftly to one side and suffering the gleaming steel to pass him by, then dealing a return blow with all the skill and power of a practiced pugilist.

For the third time that afternoon 'Patchie Bill saluted his mother earth with more emphasis than grace.

A series of wild cheers rent the air, and no voices were louder than those of the men who, an hour before, were the cringing, toadying followers of the now deposed chief.

It was with difficulty that Weston could clear the crowd, and only when he sharply bade them open a path for his passage, would they suffer him to depart, so eager were all to "treat" the man who had "licked" 'Patchie Bill.

"You are 'chief' now, Walt," laughed Pierson, as arm in arm the two friends returned to the Spread Eagle. "Two to one you are waited upon by a delegation and presented with the freedom of the city!"

"I hope not—I have played the fool already, but that rascal stirred up my old Adam. Say, Tom, who and what is that young lady?" he demanded, abruptly.

"My wife, if she will only take me!" came the response, ringing with an earnestness that could not be mistaken.

CHAPTER VI. THE SCHOOLMA'AM AT HOME.

TOM PIERSON felt just a little remorseful as he sped away from the Spread Eagle that evening. He had not actually told a lie, for that was foreign to his honest nature, but he felt almost as if he had, with his lame excuse for leaving his old friend and classmate, so soon.

"Good or bad, I'll tell him all when I get back," muttered the young miner, as a salve to his prickling conscience. "But he does run a fellow so—as if we all could carry as steady and

well-trimmed heart in our bosom as he—and goodness knows I'm flustered bad enough already, at the bare idea of storming the castle."

That afternoon's events had settled honest Tom's fate. For months he had secretly worshiped the fair schoolma'am, but despite his almost irresistible tendency to fall in love with each pretty face that crossed his path, Tom was painfully modest and thus far had been content to sigh his love out at a distance. Nor is it likely that his passion would ever have found utterance in plain words, only for the wooing of the Injun-Eater and what followed.

Tom had held that graceful, yet firm and substantial form in his arms; had felt her soft breath upon his cheek, and had even pressed her lips with his, in the excitement of the moment. A very little spark is enough to explode a powder magazine, if rightly applied, and that kiss lucky or unlucky was enough to seal Tom's fate.

His first impulse was to make a confidant of Walter Weston, and he did say enough to show that close observer he was hard hit, but he grew reticent as he recalled the past. A dozen times at least he had made similar confessions of all powerful love for some fair damsel, who reigned supreme over his heart until another pretty face chanced along, when there was sure to be an entire change of allegiance—each one being perfectly sincere as long as the fit lasted.

But Tom had grown older, and, he believed wiser. He knew that this was no evanescent fancy. Unless he could win Miss Mary Truhart for his wife, life would be a blank, a dreary desert to him. And so, dreading the sairically solemn advice which he felt from experience would be offered him by his friend, he stole away from the hotel that night soon after supper and hastened through the town, his face turned toward that Mecca of his hopes, the cosey little log-cabin which served as the everyday casket to contain his longed-for jewel, the schoolma'am.

This cabin had been erected on the spot selected by Miss Truhart herself—a highly romantic one, among the hills east of the town. Some of her new-found friends and advisers thought it too lonely and remote from aid, should such ever become necessary; but the fair, fearless creature laughed and declared her ability to defend herself against an army if need be, and like everything else on which she set her heart, she carried her point.

She had only one companion; an old half-breed woman, whether of Indian or Negro extraction was a mystery to those few who vouchsafed her a second thought, but certain it was that she was a perfect dragon in her watchful care to see her young mistress was not rudely intruded upon. Thrice she had repulsed half-drunken admirers who insisted on an evening interview with the schoolma'am, and on one occasion showed that she was no novice in the art of burning powder and slinging lead. And not once did any male denizen of Celestial City ever boast of having crossed the threshold of that dainty little cabin, after the schoolma'am once took up her abode there.

Tom Pierson was well aware of this fact, but still he did not altogether despair of succeeding

where all others had failed. He had that day clasped the fair schoolma'am in his arms, had been even more daring. True, she had been terribly alarmed, but for all that, a vague something in the manner of her yielding to his ardent embrace told Tom that the situation was not altogether an unpleasant one to her—and even now he could feel her red lips quiver beneath the pressure of his—he could almost swear she had returned his salute!

Swiftly the young miner left the town behind him and reached the foot of the rising ground. High above him he could distinguish a faint light which he knew came from the one little window of the schoolma'am's cabin. Gallantly he breasted the slope—at first; then slower and slower became his pace. It was not fatigue that troubled the young athlete, for he was gifted with the muscles and endurance of a born mountaineer, but his courage was gradually fading away like hoar-frost before the sun.

Just as a man, afflicted with a raging tooth-ache, can start boldly for a dentist's, yet find his resolution growing weaker and weaker as he nears the inquisitor's den, just so with our young lover. What if she should refuse him admittance as she had others bound on the same mission? Or, worse yet, allow him a glimpse of the casket, only to coldly refuse him the precious jewel it contained?

Every true lover has felt this painful doubt at some stage of his amatory career, and will readily comprehend why Tom paused when nearly at the door of the cabin, debating within himself whether it would not be wiser to wait for a more auspicious moment. In fact, he was on the very point of beating a precipitate retreat, when the door was flung open, and a flood of light shone fairly upon his person, while the neat form of the schoolma'am stepped over the threshold, her white hands extended.

"I felt sure you would come, Mr. Pierson!" she exclaimed, impulsively, her rich, mellow voice falling upon his ears like sweetest music. "I was watching, I confess, and when I saw you hesitate, I feared you had forgotten something and was about to return to town without knocking. I could not wait—but you will think me too impulsive—too forward—"

Tom's answer came in actions, not words, but was none the less convincing. He clasped the white hands in his brown palms, and pressed them to his lips, almost reverently.

Miss Truhart shyly withdrew them, but did not appear very greatly offended by his warmth.

"Come—the night air is cool; it is pleasanter inside."

Tom no longer thought of retreat. Surely she must know his object in visiting her, and if she had no love in her heart for him, she could not have received him thus.

"You should be highly flattered, sir," said Miss Mary, laughingly, as they entered the cabin, "for you are the first one of the sterner sex who has ever crossed this threshold since I took possession."

"I am—and yet it is a condescension that may be interpreted in both ways—"

"Take your choice between them, then, and believe the one most agreeable to your vanity," she retorted, archly, taking his hat and motion-

ing him to be seated in a chair drawn near the wide-mouthed fireplace. "My pleasure at seeing you is not altogether unselfish. I have been wanting something from town, but my body-guard refused to leave me here alone," and a wave of her white hand directed Tom's attention to the tall half-breed woman who stood across the room like a bronze statue, her eyes watching him fixedly.

He is a very bold or a very careless lover who can utter his soft nothings with any effect in the presence of a third person, and Tom Pierson was neither. He returned the keen gaze of the "guardian angel," and fancied there was some deep meaning in her burning eyes—perhaps a threat for his audacity in passing the charmed portals.

"You can go now, Karinga. Be sure and do my errand, then, if you choose, you can steal a few minutes to chat with your friends. Mr. Pierson will keep all harm from me, I am sure."

Tom sunk into the chair, almost too dizzy to stand up. There could be but one interpretation. If Miss Mary Truhart was not ready to turn a favorable ear to his suit, would she act and speak thus?

The schoolma'am drew aside with the half-breed woman and conversed earnestly in an undertone for a few moments. Perhaps it was just as well that she did. Tom had time to partially rally his senses and recover command of his voice before the old woman departed.

Then, with a low, mellow laugh that sounded on Tom's ears like music fresh from the heavenly spheres, Miss Mary drew a chair for herself up before the cheerful fire, comfortable in that elevated region, though in midsummer.

"I felt sure you would come," she said, her eyes meeting his with the sweetest imaginable sidelong glance that caused her head to turn archly to one side—if not a born coquette, the little schoolma'am knew well how to use her charms.

"And yet—I fear you will give me cause to regret having been so bold," said Tom, his pulse beating very fast, his heart thumping like mad.

The fair face flushed and the soft gray eyes looked down into the fire. Tom began to tremble, for he feared he had spoken too abruptly. He wanted to reassure the timid creature, but the right words would not come. A dozen times his lips parted, but closed as often for fear he would only make matters worse.

It may be that the little schoolma'am was disappointed by his clumsy silence, it may be that she had been puzzling her brain how to gracefully change the subject, for when she spoke, Tom saw that that chance was gone.

"You must have thought me very ungrateful, Mr. Pierson, to run away without even thanking you for your generous service to-day. But I was so frightened—so annoyed at being made the center of observation, that I could think only of escaping from the crowd."

"I did nothing deserving thanks—somehow I never do," ruefully uttered Tom. "I always sputter around until somebody with sound sense gets in ahead of me. So it was to-day. I meant well enough, but Walt took the job out of my hands before I fairly knew it."

"Was he—that stranger—your friend?" and Tom felt a little wrench at his heart-strings as he noted the eager glow in those gray eyes as they met his, but he honestly replied:

"The best and truest friend I ever knew—a heart of gold!"

"You praise him very highly."

"No higher than he deserves—no more than the truth. I have tested him through fair and foul weather, and have yet to see him flinch or fail."

"Do you know, when I first heard his voice, I believed the dead had risen from the grave—and his face but deepened that wild fancy!" earnestly uttered Miss Mary, her eyes still riveted upon his. "And he, too, seemed startled, when he looked upon my face. And yet—it could not be—surely the story was true—he is dead, long ago!"

Tom made no reply, but sat in most uneasy silence. His blissful hopes were vanishing, one by one. Truly this was not an encouraging beginning.

"He did not speak of me?" added the schoolma'am.

"Only to ask who and what you were," moodily responded Tom.

"And you told him?"

The words he had used in reply to Weston's question rose in his throat, but were choked down. He would not be fool enough to utter them now.

"Yes; what little I knew concerning you," he said, instead.

"And he? He did not recognize my name?"

"If so, he made no sign. Why, were you ever acquainted?"

"No—it could not be—they told me the truth—he died," murmured Miss Mary, as if unconsciously; then adding: "I must have been mistaken in my fancy, but he wonderfully resembles one whom I once knew and highly regarded. You say he asked about me—let me return the compliment. What is your friend's name and occupation, and how came he here? By your invitation, perhaps?"

"No; I was never more astonished in my life than when I saw him on the stage this afternoon. We had lost sight of each other for several years, though our brotherly love and friendship never waned. His name is Walter Weston, and he is Sheriff of Placer County, with his headquarters at Oroville."

"Ah! then he comes hither on professional duties, no doubt?"

Tom hesitated, though only for a moment, but that was long enough for the keen-witted schoolma'am, and she drew a little more erect, with a touch of hauteur in her voice.

"I do not ask you to betray any confidences, Mr. Pierson—"

"Walt warned me to be cautious, but of course he did not mean—that is, it can do no harm to tell you," said Tom, a little clumsily, adding hastily, before she could speak again: "The fact is Walt comes here on an important as well as dangerous mission. Some time ago, there was a succession of atrocious crimes committed in and around Oroville, all of them being pretty clearly traced back to one man, who

passed under a dozen different names, but whose right name it is believed, is Ralph Keeler."

"I have read or heard something of this, I believe. He escaped all pursuit, did he not?"

"Yes, and covered his trail so well that many believed he was dead—killed, perhaps, in a quarrel with some one of his comrades in crime. But they were wrong—he still lived, and is at this very moment lurking somewhere near this town; in fact, is the leader of the footpads or road-agents who were so busy last month."

The gray eyes glanced toward the window; then, with a little nervous shiver, the schoolma'am drew nearer Tom.

"It was bad enough before, but now that I know that merciless fiend in human guise is hovering around here, I wish I had not been so notional in having my home built so far from town. But there is no doubt? He is really here—this Ralph Keeler?"

"From what Walt said, I don't see how there can be any doubt of that. Of course it is a secret yet, and you will be careful not to breathe a word of this, even to your servant—"

"Karinga is my servant, not my confidante," interposed the schoolma'am, a little sharply.

"I always was and always will be a blunderer," dolefully said Pierson. "Now you are offended at me!"

"No; you have been too kind, too brave and generous for a trifle to come between us," softly said the schoolma'am, and her firm white hand was gently placed upon his arm, only to be quickly imprisoned by the brown paw of the love-sick miner. "But tell me," she added, hastily, cutting short the tender speech that trembled on his lips, "how did he learn this, your friend?"

"From a member of the band, whom I suppose Keeler has in some manner wronged or offended. There was no name given, but Weston is satisfied that the information is genuine, and confidently expects to capture Ralph Keeler before this week is out."

"In what manner? What is the scheme? You see," and the schoolma'am laughed softly, "I am as eager as yourself for the complete success of your friend, partly because I shall never feel easy now that I know that terrible villain is skulking near, partly because Mr. Weston is your friend," and a soft pressure from the white hand emphasized the flattery, and sent a thrill of delight tingling through every nerve of the honest young miner.

"I do not know, nor do I believe Weston does," he hastened to reply. "The arrangement is this: the fellow who sent the information is to make himself known to Walter tomorrow night, while Weston's movements, of course, will be guided by what he learns from the informer."

"Let us hope he may meet with perfect success," said Mary with a long breath. "So handsome and gallant an officer must deserve every success—"

"Shall I tell him this, from you?"

"Do you think he would be pleased or feel flattered?"

"What man would not? If such words were brought to me from your lips—" impulsively began Tom.

"You would laugh at my forwardness."

"No—but I would test your earnestness. I would come to you and say that my whole heart and brain were bent on gaining one object—and would ask you to wish me success. Then I would tell you—Mary, I must say it!" he cried impetuously, clasping both her hands in his and bending over the gently drooping head. "For that purpose alone I came here this morning. What I said, I repeat. I seek to win one prize—your love. Do you—can you, wish me success?"

It was out at last, and with his heart in his throat, poor Tom Pierson waited for the answer—fatal or life-giving.

The little schoolma'am seemed taken by surprise, and faintly strove to release her hands, her eyes downcast. Poor Tom took this as an evil omen, and straightway his heart sought to sink down into his very boots. Slowly and reluctantly he released her hands, sighing dolefully.

"I never dreamed of such a thing, Mr. Pierson," faltered the little schoolma'am, the liquid gray eyes shyly meeting his. "It comes so sudden that I hardly know what to say."

If true love is easily cast down, so a word, a tone, is sufficient to revive its drooping spirits. Tom was well-nigh despairing, but something in the tone of the schoolma'am filled his heart with hope and his soul with joy ecstatic.

"Say yes—say that you will try to love me—that you will be my wife!" he said, ardently.

"But we are almost strangers—you know so little of me—"

"Enough to know that I love you with my whole soul!"

"But I may be bad—there may be disgrace in my past—"

"Stop! not even from your lips will I listen to aught against the purity of the woman whom I love!"

There was something close akin to sublimity in his tones and manner of uttering these impetuous words, and a peculiar gray shade crept over the schoolma'am's face as his strong arms clasped her to his honest breast. She shivered, too, and both together told Tom that all was not plain sailing yet.

"There is only one thing that can part us now," he added, gravely, looking down into her eyes. "It is barely possible that you are bound to another—"

A low laugh bubbled from her lips, but almost instantly she was grave and solemn again.

"You mean if I am married? I am not—I never was. And yet there is something in my past life that stands between us. It may possibly prove no serious barrier if your love is true and earnest—but it is there, and while there, I cannot give you the answer you ask."

"Tell me what that barrier is, and I will remove it if man can," said Pierson, quietly, but with an earnestness that could not be mistaken.

"Some day—not now. The story is too long and painful for me to tell—you have startled me so. And Karinga may come home at any moment. Please go," the little schoolma'am uttered brokenly, almost hysterically.

"Your word is law to me, now and ever. But give me one word of hope to live upon—until when?"

"One week—give me that long to decide. But remember—if fate decrees that I cannot marry you, no other man shall ever call me wife!" softly whispered Mary.

One long, clinging kiss, then Tom hastened toward town.

CHAPTER VII.

A BLOW FROM THE ENEMY.

WARM and sincere as was his friendship for Thomas Pierson, Walter Weston was not seriously offended when that honest young fellow gave him the slip almost directly after supper. He had been given plenty of food for thought since his arrival at Celestial City, and felt just in the mood for a sober bit of thinking.

Lighting his cigar, he went out on the broad veranda. The surer to guard against unwished-for intrusion upon his thoughts, Weston carried his chair near the further end of the veranda, then leaned comfortably back against the side of the building.

The cool evening air, fresh from the pine-clad mountains, was just bracing enough to render his thoughts clear and active, and keep him from falling into a dreamy reverie.

Naturally he was most concerned about the success of the bold project which had brought him hither. Until now, he had never doubted but that he was working on a sure foundation of truth. The capture of Ralph Keeler would be a great feather in his cap, should this information prove genuine. But he just began to realize the many chances against him.

The letter containing the information on which he acted, might be no more than a clumsy practical joke, or it might turn out a cunning decoy to lead him to his death. This last supposition was strongly favored by what had occurred since his arrival in Celestial City—by the peculiar parts played by the Injun-Eater and Simon Quirk. The "chief" had been ordered to draw him into a quarrel and then make sure work of him.

Weston smiled grimly as he pictured to himself the Injun-Eater's amazement at running against such a decided snag, where he had confidently anticipated clear sailing to a dangerless victory, and by a natural transition his thoughts turned upon the young schoolma'am.

His brows contracted and a hard light came into his blue eyes as that fair face arose before him, and that mellow, peculiar voice again sounded in his ears.

That they had met before, he felt confident, but where and when? Both face, form and voice were peculiar ones, and not easily forgotten or confounded with others. And as he puzzled his brain, a sudden light burst upon him.

"By the Lord! that's the solution of the riddle!" he muttered, barely above his breath. "That accounts for the voice and face—and it proves that my game is really here!"

On one occasion only had the young sheriff—or lawyer, since that was before the day of his election—met Ralph Keeler face to face and heard him speak, though at the time he was ignorant of the fellow's real character. He soon afterward learned who had been his fellow-traveler, and recalled both voice and face, photographing them on his memory until he

felt confident of recognizing either even after the lapse of years. And he knew now that it was this voice and face that had so perplexed him in the case of the young schoolma'am; and right there he saw through the mystery.

He remembered the sensational, almost incredible tales which were put in circulation concerning a fair woman who had shared Ralph Keeler's boldest exploits—one who had dared death at his side, and more than once preserved him from death, or its equivalent, captivity, by recklessly risking her own life. Whether wife or sister, no one could say, but from the strong resemblance between their faces and voices, it was thought the latter; most probably they were twins. She vanished at the same time with the notorious outlaw, nor had either of them been heard of, despite the most persistent search, until Weston received an anonymous note offering to deliver Ralph Keeler and his men to justice, on condition that the informer should receive full pardon for his past crimes. Weston immediately placed this note before the governor and received all necessary papers, with authority to fill out the blank with the name of his informant, provided his part of the agreement was faithfully performed.

All doubts were gone now. If Ralph Keeler's sister was here, then the brother could not be far away. And yet—as he recalled that fair face, Weston sighed involuntarily—then started as he heard the sigh echoed from close to his elbow.

"'Tis only poor me, senor," came a low, sweet voice which he instantly recognized, and turning his head, Weston saw the fair Miranda sitting at the window close beside him. "You must not think me too bold, too forward; but I could wait no longer to thank you for so generously defending me against his terrible wrath—"

"You are speaking of your husband, madam," coldly interposed Weston, more as an assertion than a question, but the fair Miranda preferred the latter interpretation.

"Alas! yes—a husband in name—nothing more. If you could only know—could only realize how bitterly—"

"I have neither the right nor the inclination to do so," he again interposed, brusquely, even rudely.

Miranda heaved another sigh, but unmistakable as the rebuff was, she would not accept it, but spoke again.

At that moment Crooked Cale stepped upon the veranda, and turned toward Weston, but as he caught the sound of his wife's voice, he wheeled abruptly and descended to the street. The young man's first impulse was to arise and hasten after the misanthropic landlord, but a dread of being misunderstood caused him to hesitate.

It was plain that Miranda had also noticed the departure of her husband, and had gained courage by that knowledge, for her language became more outspoken than ever. With her, flirting was a disease. She had inherited the monomania from her mother, so Tom Pierson assured him. Yet, as he recalled the tragic story of Crooked Cale, and thought of all he had

suffered through love of this weak, silly woman, Weston could no longer restrain his angry contempt.

"You cannot imagine, ever so faintly, the unutterable horror with which one's soul is filled when brought into immediate contact with such an uncogenial spirit," the fair Miranda was gently sighing. "Oh! dearly have I paid the penalty of yielding to the selfish wishes of my parent—a life in death is mine—but how utterly miserable I never realized until to-day! Alas! had we met sooner—"

"Madam, it may save you some breath if you will take a gentle hint," broke in Weston, wheeling in his chair and fairly facing the landlady. "I always was a fool at carrying on a flirtation, and of late years have positively sworn off. Take my advice and save your amorous ammunition for those too young and green to know when they are being saluted with blank cartridges. As for me—I am a married man, and the father of seventeen children!"

Weston turned and left the veranda, before the amazed and insulted Miranda could recover sufficiently to make reply. It was the first time he had ever been guilty of deliberate rudeness to one of the weaker sex, but his conscience did not trouble him greatly. Since hearing the gloomy story of Crooked Cale, he could feel only contempt for the silly, frivolous woman.

Weston had no settled purpose in view when he left the hotel, but strolled aimlessly through the town, now brilliantly lighted up and far more lively than during the day, as is generally the case with all mining towns. Those who had worked hard during the day, were now beginning to seek a brief recreation before turning in.

It was natural enough for Walter Weston to seek out the street corner where his unknown correspondent had promised to meet him on the evening of the day following his arrival in Celestial City, but he did so without the faintest expectation of anything important resulting therefrom.

He had scarcely reached the corner when a tall but stoop-shouldered man, wearing his hat slouched and form well wrapped in a dark cloak, glided out of the shadows and paused for a moment beside him, muttering rapidly:

"I was in hopes you would come to-night. I'm afraid it has got wind, or if the truth is not suspected—"

"Please keep your distance, my good fellow," said Weston, as he allowed the light to fall upon the polished butt of his ready revolver, "and don't be too familiar on short acquaintance. I have not the honor of knowing your name—"

"Bah!" impatiently cried the stranger. "I was to meet you on this corner, to-morrow night, and say: 'My life for that of Ralph Keeler.' If you agreed to my terms—"

"I have the papers, only lacking your name—and that I will fill in the moment you deliver the goods agreed upon," quickly uttered Weston.

"It would be easily done, had you acted with common prudence," muttered the informer, with an uneasy glance around them. "You might almost as well have published your purpose of taking Ralph Keeler, on every street corner—"

"What happened was not my fault," shortly interposed Weston.

"Talking won't mend it, anyhow," with another nervous glance around. "The boys know that you are here, and that will make the job harder than I thought for, but I still believe it can be done—and the sooner the better. Bully Bill was set on to cripple you up, or rub you out if the risk was not too great. He failed, but the next time may be better planned."

"So long as they come at me openly, I don't care much."

"But the next may be a blow in the back—and it may fall this very night. I have noticed nearly a dozen of the boys in town to-night, and I believe they mean mischief. For that reason I looked you up. But I can't tell you all here. You are stopping at the hotel?"

"The Spread Eagle, yes."

"A private room there will be better than the open street. Remember I am risking my life in this bit of work."

"Just as you say. You can follow me—not too close. I have keen ears, and know how to handle my tools. No offense; only we are not very well acquainted yet, you see."

"I'm not overly thin-skinned. I have been a precious rascal, but I want to turn over a new leaf. My wife and children are on their way Overland, and I'd hate mightily for them to find me a fugitive. For their sake I am betraying Ralph Keeler—to earn my pardon."

Walter Weston was a good judge of human nature, and he believed this man was speaking the truth. His voice and manner were not those of a man who was playing a part. And so, without thought of treachery, he turned and led the way toward the Spread Eagle, eager to get at the knowledge held by this man.

Suddenly the informer, whose eyes never ceased roving apprehensively around them, drew close to the sheriff and said:

"I fear we are being followed—we had better separate."

"I'd rather not lose sight of you, my friend," said Weston, bluntly. "I've traveled too far to lose the trail now."

"Then turn the next corner, and try to dodge them!"

Weston glanced to the rear. He saw two men approaching them, the one who had aroused the suspicions of the outlaw.

At that moment, before they could advance or retreat, a noisy crowd emerged from the saloon before which they stood, and instantly closed around them, seemingly by accident.

Weston, with a sudden exertion of strength, nearly pushed his way through, when a wild scream of agony rent the air!

"My God! I am stabbed!"

Instantly the crowd scattered, leaving a man swaying feebly on his feet, both hands pressed upon his left side. One moment—then his limbs yielded, and he sunk to the ground.

In that moment Walter Weston recognized the poor wretch—none other than his late companion, the informer!

"Murder! kill the durned 'sassin!" yelled a burly ruffian as he thrust a revolver almost into the sheriff's face.

Doubly surprised though he was, Weston saved

his life by his almost superhuman quickness. Ducking his head and knocking the weapon up with his left arm at the same time, the bullet passed harmlessly through the crown of his hat. Then a swift forward leap and blow sent the Russian headlong to the ground.

An active bound carried him clear of his enemies, but he retreated no further.

A tall form suddenly burst through the line, and Weston quickly covered it with his pistol, crying:

"Back! I am ready to surrender to the marshal, or any one authorized to arrest me, but no other man shall take me!"

"Not while I live!" and Weston recognized Tom Pierson. "Back, you cowardly bloodhounds! Who dares to accuse this gentleman of stabbing a man—"

"I dare—we all see'd him do it!" blustered a burly fellow.

"I never hurt the man, but I am ready to surrender and stand my trial, if there is any officer of justice present. No mob of lynchers can take me alive."

Weston's voice was calm and clear as though he was not in deadly peril of his life. His leveled revolvers, moving from man to man as they pressed or were crowded nearer, kept the open space inviolate, reinforced as they were by the arms of bold Tom Pierson. The yells for blood and threats of lynching still continued, but they came from those on the outskirts of the crowd, where the danger of an answer was lessened by the human wall between.

Just how the dead-lock would have ended, can only be surmised, but for a startling interruption. A loud, commanding voice rung out above the tumult, saying:

"Hold, all! I have captured the assassin! I saw him deal the dastard blow!"

The voice was that of Crooked Cale.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CONFESSION CUT SHORT.

IT was indeed the landlord of the Spread Eagle, and as the eyes of the crowd were turned eagerly in the direction of his voice, they beheld the hunchback pushing a burly captive before him, one hand grasping his throat with a suffocating gripe. And they saw more.

A slender, wiry form darted upon the twain, and there was an ugly glimmer of steel in the red glow of the lamps, but whether the blow was dealt at captor or captive, few of those who witnessed the venomous attack could tell.

Swift the weapon fell, but Crooked Cale was on his guard, and the wrist of the would-be assassin fell into his strong right hand, the fingers closing upon the member like a vise. One fierce gripe, a sudden exertion of strength, and a gasp of agony came from the lips of Simon Quirk. With the same motion that disabled him thus, he was drawn forward, then a sturdy kick sent him headlong into the middle of the street, an enemy no longer to be dreaded.

The prisoner made a desperate effort to free himself, but in vain.

"Back! don't crowd me too close!" he cried, and there was a stern menace in his tones.

"There's a dozen more of the gang here, but not enough to loosen my grip on this assassin."

"What's the row here?" demanded a sharp voice, and the swaying crowd gave way before the presence of a pair of broad shoulders and brawny limbs. "Having another circus, Cale Keystone?"

"Simply performing your duty, marshal," and there was a poorly disguised taunt in the tones of the speaker. "One man has been murdered and an innocent gentleman almost lynched for the crime, by the mates of the assassin—"

"Who's killed, and who killed him?" demanded the marshal.

"Dan Force was stabbed. I saw the man that struck the blow, and followed him as he ran, while his mates closed around Mr. Weston to fasten the crime on him and aid in the escape of the real culprit. I captured the fellow, and here he lies. I charge him with murder, and surrender him to you, as an officer of the law—"

"And let the real criminal escape—"

"If by that you mean me, you lie in your teeth!" cried Walter Weston, pressing forward.

"And who in blazes are you?" roughly demanded the marshal.

"A man, half white and free born," indignantly began Weston, but Tom Pierson grasped his arm warningly and cut short his angry speech, himself addressing the officer.

"I will answer for him, Mr. Morey. He is as innocent as either you or I, for as I came up, I saw a man running away."

"The same fellow I have here!" exclaimed Crooked Cale, and he held aloft the blood-stained right hand where all could see the tell-tale dye in the bright light that streamed through the open doors of the saloon.

Loud cries—some of surprise, some of wonder, some of grim pleasure, and still others of denial—went up from the crowd as they recognized the prisoner, none other than William Baxter, the self-styled "Injun-Eater!"

"It's a p'izen lie—I never done it!" he spluttered. "It's all a dirty 'spiracy to massacre a innocent critter—"

"The man's alive—Dan Force ain't dead yit!" yelled an excited voice from where the fallen man lay.

"Look to it, marshal!" cried Crooked Cale. "Keep back the crowd—make them give him air—he may be able to tell the truth, unless this fellow's pals get ahead of you!"

The first mad impulse of the mob had had time to cool, and now the honest portion of the crowd was eager only to learn the real facts of the case. They were none the less dangerous, as experience told the evil disposed, and a cool observer might have noticed those who had been the foremost in raising the cry of blood against Walter Weston, gradually edging their way through the crowd and stealing away through the densest shadows of the night.

Marshal Morey pressed his way to where Dan Force lay, and kneeling beside him, raised the dying man's head.

"Clear a space and give him air!" he cried sternly.

"No use—I'm done for!" gasped the informer, faintly.

"Brace up, old fellow—who was it cut you?"

"I—don't know—he struck—from behind—"

"Was it Sheriff Weston?" demanded Tom Pierson.

The question seemed to rouse up the dying man, and in a much clearer voice he made reply:

"No—he was ahead of me, while they struck me from behind. He couldn't have reached me if he had tried. I don't know whose hand cut me, but I know why it was done. Ralph Keeler gave the order—because I meant to sell—God! I am—choking—oh!"

"Water—whiskey here—quick!" cried the marshal. "He must say more—spit it out, old fellow!"

But it was too late! A gasping, gurgling groan, then he fell back, and Dan Force was dead!

One moment of breathless silence, then the fury of the mob burst forth anew, but now rightly directed so far as justice was concerned. One united rush, and almost ere he could realize the truth, Crooked Cale was thrust aside and his captive was held in the midst of two-score frowning men.

There were not many who would have done so, even had there been no danger. The marshal, Crooked Cale, Pierson and Weston—hardly another.

The four men interchanged glances, but could draw no hope from what they saw in each other's eyes. If they could gain possession of the criminal, they could close around him and thus fight their way through, possibly without firing a shot. But in losing that advantage, they lost all. Thrice their number could not have pierced that frowning circle—to make the attempt would be suicidal.

"Come, boys," said Crooked Cale, though with little hope of succeeding, "hanging is too good for the wretch, I admit, but don't let's descend to his own level. We have law here, as the past has proven. Give the fellow a fair trial—"

"As much as he gave Dan Force—no more!"

"Gentlemen, let me say a few words," uttered Weston, earnestly. "Only a few moments ago, you were ready to lynch me for this murder. I am innocent, as the dead man declared. He could not say who dealt the fatal blow—then how can any of you, who were mistaken in my case?"

"Crooked Cale swore he saw the blow dealt—will he acknowledge he told a lie when he said so?" demanded the miner.

"No—I swore to the truth," slowly replied the deformed. "I saw Baxter cut Force, and so captured him, to save the innocent. I will swear the same before the court, and my oath will be sufficient to condemn him. Then why make yourselves murderers, when his crime is sure of punishment?"

"Why wait a week, a month, or a year, when five minutes is long enough to settle the matter?"

"Let me tell you why," cried Weston, with increasing earnestness. "Because, by a brief delay, we can strike the head that planned what this wretch was only the hand to execute. You

heard the partial confession he made. Let me finish it, so far as I can.

"Many, if not all of you have heard of Ralph Keeler, one of the blackest-hearted and most desperate criminals that ever cursed this fair land. His worst crimes were committed in Placer county. We hunted him close, and finally exterminated his gang of cut-throats, but he escaped and baffled all our searching. We were ignorant whether he lived still or was dead until I, as Sheriff of Placer, received an anonymous note from here, offering to deliver Ralph Keeler into my hands, on conditions which need not be more particularly mentioned, as the man whom they were to benefit is now dead—the one you called Dan Force.

"He told me he feared he was suspected and watched, and we were seeking a private place where we could talk without danger of being overheard, when that gang set upon us and killed him. But for that crime, I would now be in possession of the knowledge necessary to capture Ralph Keeler—the chief of the road-agents who have plied their nefarious trade in your midst for the past year.

"Now we have strong moral proof that this fellow, Baxter, is a member of that gang, or at least knows something concerning them. If you murder him, you cut off the last hope of capturing Ralph Keeler. Deliver him to the marshal, let him be jailed and brought to trial. To save his own life he will confess all—"

"We'll make him confess—nothing like a stout rope for that," impatiently interrupted the spokesman of the mob. "Enough talk, boys! Guard your prisoner, and shoot down any and all who attempt a rescue. On to the Death Tree!"

A wild cheer greeted this speech, and with ranks drawn closely around the wretched prisoner, the mob moved slowly down the street, toward the lower end of the valley where stood a huge, wide-boughed tree, whose limbs had more than once borne human fruit.

The tree of ominous name was soon reached, and scant time wasted in preliminaries.

"Ready, boys, and walk away with the rope when I give the word!" cried the leader of the mob. Then addressing the terror-palsied wretch: "Your time is short, Bill. If you have any confession to make, spit it out, or up you go!"

The Injun-Eater gasped for breath, but that look of haunting dread was still in his eyes, despite the assurance of Crooked Cale. His tongue seemed paralyzed with fear.

"Speak up, man!" cried Crooked Cale, impatiently.

The Injun-Eater's lips parted, but not to speak. A horrible, gurgling cry welled up in his throat, and then he sunk a dead weight upon the arms of his guards.

For a moment all stood aghast. They had heard a peculiar hissing sound, followed by a thud—they saw the gleaming haft of a knife protruding from the hairy throat of the prisoner, but until he fell forward a corpse, they could not realize the truth.

Then came the sharp clatter of a horse's hoofs, accompanied by a mocking laugh and taunting words.

CHAPTER IX.

RECKLESS RALPH AND HIS BLOODHOUNDS.

"RECKLESS RALPH put his seal on Bully Bill's confession!" cried the mocking voice from out the shadows beyond the Dead Tree. "Follow me, those who dare!"

For an instant all was confusion. The death-blow had been delivered so suddenly, so surely, that its very audacity served to partially paralyze the lynchers. The clatter of hoofs, the mocking laugh and defiant words told them from whence the unexpected blow had come, but they stared in that direction without a thought of pursuit until the words of Crooked Cale roused them to action.

Quick as thought he sent a brace of bullets in the direction of the voice, then cried aloud as he plunged through the paralyzed crowd:

"It's Ralph Keeler! Chase and capture—there's ten thousand dollars offered for him, dead or alive!"

Weston, Pierson and the marshal joined with him in forcing a passage, each one sending a shot or two through the gloom in hopes of bringing down the audacious outlaw, or else crippling his horse. But they were guided only by the deceptive sound of hoofstrokes and the wild laugh of Reckless Ralph, and but burned their powder in vain.

Thus boldly led, and perhaps fired by the hope of fingerling all or a portion of that rich blood-money, the majority of the miners poured in headlong haste after Crooked Cale and his comrades.

"Put in your best licks!" grated Crooked Cale, as he dashed on through the night at a rate of speed wonderful in one so terribly deformed. "He can't leave the valley on horseback save by way of the Devil's Stairway—we may be able to head him off yet!"

No answer was made. Breath was too precious to be needlessly spent, and active as both Weston and Pierson were, they had to strain every muscle to the utmost to keep from being distanced by the deformed. As for the marshal, he was panting in the rear, every moment dropping further behind.

The foot of the steep ascent was reached, but not soon enough to intercept the outlaw. Mockingly his laugh floated down to them, and through the clear moonlight they could see him riding up the Devil's Stairway, turning around in his saddle and waving them a defiant adieu with his hand.

In swift succession their revolvers exploded, but still the outlaw rode on, laughing recklessly as the ragged lead whistled around him, apparently disdaining to quicken his flight—then the black shadows once more swallowed him up as the Stairway made an abrupt curve around the hillside.

"The devil guards his own!" pettishly cried Pierson. "He must have sold his soul for a charmed life!"

"Moonlight shooting is deceptive, particularly after such a nerve-destroying burst of speed," replied Crooked Cale. "But we may outwit him yet. Will you back me?"

"To the death!" cried Weston, breasting the steep ascent.

He was not suffered to keep the lead long.

Actively as an ape, Crooked Cale bounded past him, and on they pressed with unabated speed until they reached the line of shadow into which the daring outlaw had vanished.

A shrill whistle rung out upon the still night air, and as they involuntarily paused in surprise, a single jet of flame shot out of the gloom ahead.

Weston instinctively leaped aside as he felt a burning pain on the side of his throat, but a choking cry issued from Tom Pierson's lips as he staggered and would have fallen to the ground, but for the prompt support lent him by Crooked Cale.

"I meant that for you, Walt Weston!" shouted the concealed marksman. "Better luck next time!" and once more the clatter of iron-shod hoofs rung through the rocky hills.

No longer thinking of pursuit, with thoughts only for his bosom friend, Weston knelt beside the body which Crooked Cale gently lowered to the ground. Blood was flowing over the pale face from a wound in the temple where the bullet, after grazing Weston's throat, had struck and apparently pierced the young miner's brain. To the tear-dimmed eyes of the sheriff, his loved comrade was already dead, but Crooked Cale, cool as an iceberg, but tender as a woman, examined the wound and confidently made the assertion:

"A close call, but the lad will be little the worse for it in the morning—an aching head, perhaps; no more."

Weston's heart beat more freely, but he could not yet accept the flat, positively as it was delivered.

By this time the foremost of the lynchers came panting up, and Crooked Cale called for volunteers to press the pursuit. A few responded, but the majority seemed to think it useless, and Weston found plenty of hands to assist in forming a rude litter and carrying poor Tom back to Celestial City.

Reckless Ralph, as Keeler had called himself, after witnessing the miscarriage of his last shot, which he had hoped would forever rid him of his most dangerous enemy, clapped spurs to his willing horse and resumed his flight in earnest. He expected persistent pursuit, and resolved not to lose a single chance, he rode long and hard, keeping to the main trail for several miles, but finally veering abruptly to the left, winding through a rocky defile where the flinty soil would not retain the imprints of his horse's hoofs, should his enemies attempt to follow his trail by daylight.

After this he proceeded more leisurely, yet with the air of one who had his destination in view, only drawing rein when at a secluded spot not more than three miles from Celestial City, but considerably removed from the main or stage road.

He put a small metal whistle to his lips and blew a peculiarly modulated, quavering call, then bent his head in acute attention. Like an echo cast back by the frowning rocks there came the counterpart of his signal, and he raised his head with an air of mingled relief and satisfaction.

Once more he sounded his whistle—two short, sharp blasts, and as an answer came promptly,

he urged his horse forward directly toward a high, nearly perpendicular cliff, whose face was densely clothed with shrubs and vines.

Dismounting, he pushed aside a mass of foliage, and his horse, without any hesitation moved forward, its iron-shod hoofs ringing upon the rock floor with a hollow sound that betrayed the presence of a cavern.

Ralph Keeler followed and let the leafy screen fall behind him. All was intense darkness, but he spoke:

"How many of the boys are here?"

"A dozen, captain," came the answer from beside him. "But the others may come in, after a bit, if there's work on hand."

"Nothing so very urgent. You remain here, and don't answer any call from without, until you are sure it is genuine. The hills are full of human bloodhounds, and they may try to play some trick. Two traitors in one night! There may be others who have caught the same disease."

"No one shall pass me alive until I know he is one of the family, captain," was the quiet but resolute response.

"If all were like you, Borden! And yet I would have risked my life on the good faith of Dan Force! Bah! every man has his price, and true as we now think ourselves, Borden, you may betray me, or I you, before the end comes," and with a bitter, cynical laugh, Keeler turned away.

He strode through the intense gloom for a few yards, then paused and cried aloud:

"Strike a light some of you. We must transact our business and get back to our everyday life before daylight."

A match was struck and a rude lamp ignited. Its feeble rays scarcely dispelled the gloom, and prevented a close inspection of the cavern, but amply served the purpose for which it was intended. Its red, smoky beams fell upon a dozen rough forms, the majority of whom had figured prominently in wild scenes of that night in Celestial City.

Among them was the burly ruffian who first charged Walter Weston with murdering Dan Force. Beside him stood Dick Piner, leader of the mob, who had been so resolved on hanging the Injun-Eater, and so opposed to giving him a chance to confess—as well he might be, judging from his presence here!

"Thanks for your responding so promptly to my call, boys," began Ralph Keeler, after making a note of those present. "It proves you faithful, at least. So may the others be, but their failure to meet here is a point against them. Each one of you will keep an eye on them, and if you see any signs of their communicating with Crooked Cale, the marshal, or that Weston, cut it short, even though you are obliged to use powder and steel! Unfortunately each member of the band holds the lives of his mates in the hollow of his hand, and a single traitor, if allowed full swing, can bring us every one to the hangman's noose!"

There was no reply to this unpleasantly pointed speech, but that it struck home, was plain from the sullen and suspicious glances which were cast around the circle by each man.

Reckless Ralph smiled grimly for he knew

that the seed he had sown had fallen on fruitful ground.

"Now to business. If we think to keep our family together, and continue in business here, there are two men who must be put out of the way without delay. You can guess who one of them is, after this night's work; Walter Weston, Sheriff of Placer.

"He came here with the express purpose of capturing me and exterminating my band—meaning you. If left alone, he will be as good as his oath, for candidly, he is a foe to be dreaded; a man utterly without personal fear, cool and keen-witted, besides being gifted with that peculiar magnetism that enables him to collect a force of devoted followers where any other man would fail."

"Crooked Cale is just as hard a nut to crack," muttered burly Dick Piner. "Of the two, I'd rather tackle the sheriff."

"I'll look after Caliban, for the sake of his widow, the fair Miranda," laughed Keeler, showing his white teeth. "I fancy she and I will make a more appropriate couple than the present landlord and landlady of the Spread Eagle. But let that go.

"Piner, you, Gomez and Fool Zimmerman will attend to the sheriff. Put your heads together and form your own plans, but bear this in mind: there is no time to be lost. If possible, take Weston prisoner and bring him here, alive. I will give you a hundred dollars apiece, out of my own pocket by way of reward."

Until now, the three men named for this delicate and dangerous piece of work, had looked anything but overjoyed; but their faces lightened at the mention of the liberal reward, and Ralph Keeler knew they would earn it if mortal men could.

"There is nothing more to be settled now, I believe. Be on hand early to-morrow night, and if the boys succeed in capturing Weston, I'll show you some glorious fun. Better scatter when you leave this, and then if you meet anybody, why, you have been hunting for Ralph Keeler—ha! ha!"

Reckless Ralph was one of the first to leave the cavern, not taking his horse, and then the outlaws, one by one stole away through the hills scattering widely before turning their faces toward Celestial City.

Ralph Keeler, though pressing straight onward, observed a certain degree of caution, holding himself in readiness for either flight or fight should he come upon any of his pursuers, but fortune favored him in this respect, for not a single human being did he hear or see by the way.

He reached the high hills above the little cabin where dwelt the fair schoolma'am, and descending to the shelf on which it was built, by means of a winding trail, increasing his caution the nearer he came to his goal.

He closely scrutinized every covert where an enemy or spy could possibly be lying in wait, only advancing when he felt sure that the coast was clear.

At length he lay low beneath a clump of bushes not far from the house, and took a final survey of the surroundings. Apparently he was satisfied at length that no suspicious enemy

was near, for he uttered a low, quavering whistle. Almost immediately there came an answer from the cabin, and the hunted outlaw drew a long breath of relief.

He glided forward and rapped lightly at the door. It swung noiselessly ajar, and a voice—the voice of a woman, soft and low—greeted him eagerly as he slipped through the opening.

Then the door closed, and once more the cabin seemed deserted.

CHAPTER X.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH.

SHORTLY after supper on the evening following the one which witnessed the death of the "Injun-Eater," Walter Weston sat smoking his cigar on the broad veranda of the Spread Eagle.

He had not been idle during the interval, nor was he exactly idle now, for his brain was busy laying plans for the capture of the daring outlaw whom he had come so far to arrest. He and a volunteer posse had scoured the hills and passes nearly all day in search of the outlaw's rendezvous, but without success. More than once they passed within sight of the cunningly chosen retreat, but always unsuspecting the truth—that there were those among their ranks who could, if they chose, tell them all they most wanted to know.

Weston had just come down from Tom Pierson's room, leaving his friend to go to sleep. His wound was not really dangerous, Ralph Keeler's bullet having been deflected by striking the bone, but he had a raging headache, and the doctor insisted on perfect quiet.

Weston was feeling a little sad, just now, for in his half-delirium, Pierson had made full admission of his love for Miss Mary Truhart, and told all that passed between them the evening before.

"It accounts for all, then!" he reflected. "She is his sister, and no doubt is in constant communication with the rascal. She pumped Tom, and then told him—Ha! it may be that he was even then concealed about the house!"

It was a truly startling thought, and explained much that had puzzled the sheriff most sorely. It would also explain the almost nun-like seclusion of the fair young schoolma'am, and her persistent refusal to receive visitors.

"Poor Tom! She is playing with him like a cat with a mouse. Some day he will feel her claws, but not if I can help it!"

Almost unconsciously Weston muttered these words above his breath, ceasing abruptly as he noticed a dark form rapidly yet stealthily stealing toward him, keeping in the shadow as much as possible, as though fearful of attracting observation. His hand sought the butt of a pistol, and he gathered himself up in readiness for either offense or defense, when the creeping form paused, uplifting its head so that the clear moonlight fell full upon its features.

Not a very prepossessing looking countenance, for the hairless face was wrinkled and puckered into countless wrinkles, reminding one of a badly frost-bitten crab-apple. The goggle-eyes were light and fishy-looking, lending an idiotic expression to the whole countenance, that was emphasized by the name its owner wore, Fool Zimmerman.

Weston had noticed the fellow about the hotel stables, and Crooked Cale had spoken of him as a cunning rascal, more knave than fool, despite the name to which alone he would answer. He was given his living in exchange for acting as boy of all work around the stables.

Weston smiled as he recognized Fool Zimmerman and released his weapon, but he was not a little surprised when he saw the idiot press one finger upon his lips, with a swift, stealthy glance around, then beckoned him down. He knew that Crooked Cale was absent, and half expecting the landlord had sent Fool Zimmerman to him with a message, Weston left the veranda.

"What do you want?" he demanded, as the idiot tugged at his sleeve in silence, while nodding his head violently in the direction from whence he had come.

"He sent me—said you must come—not let anybody know," huskily muttered Fool Zimmerman, glancing apprehensively around him.

"Who sent you, and what for?" again demanded Weston, his suspicions being awakened by the strange actions of the fellow.

"The boss—Crooked Cale—don't tell him I called him that! He'd smash me! I didn't mean to do it—"

"Tell me just what Crooked Cale told you, or I'll mark you worse than he can," sharply uttered Weston, tightening his grip upon the idiot's arm, believing fear would make him speak quicker than milder measures: and he was right.

"He said go find Mr. Weston, an' fetch him here quick as you kin—don't stop fer nothin', but mind nobody else don't hear what you say. Tell him I've ketched the head sarpint, an' want him to 'dentify the critter to make sure."

Weston felt a thrill of wild exultation, such as only the bunters of men when successful can realize, but his experience of the past night rendered him more than usually prudent. This message might be genuine, or it might all be a cunning ruse to put him out of the way.

"Where is Crooked Cale? Who has he captured?"

"He's out yender a bit, watchin' his pris'ner. Don't know fer sure who it is, but he ketched him up nigh the schoolmom's cabin—an' I helped him, I did!"

Weston was satisfied. He himself had come to believe that Ralph Keeler would be likely to seek another interview with his sister—if sister Mary Truhart was—at all risks, and had almost resolved to watch the cabin that night. He could understand why Crooked Cale sent for him in such a manner, and why he urged all secrecy on his messenger. It was barely possible that he had captured the wrong man, Weston could surely identify him. And then, unless he was placed in the strong jail and well guarded before the news of his capture spread, there would be double danger: that his friends would attempt his rescue, and the lynchers try to hang him.

"Lead the way to where you left him," said Weston, adding in a significant tone: "Mind you don't try to fool me, if you value a whole skull!"

Fool Zimmerman grinned, then shuffled on ahead, choosing the deepest shadow, closely fol-

lowed by the sheriff who, more from habit than from any actual suspicion of treachery, kept one hand on his revolver, while his keen glances roved swiftly around him.

The town was cleared without any interruption, and the base of the hill midway up which nestled the schoolma'am's cabin was neared. Fool Zimmerman turned his head as he pointed forward, and muttered:

"Thar's the boss—you won't say I called him Crooked Cale?"

Weston's eyes were good, but he failed to perceive the person indicated, and was on a point of saying so, when the noose of the lasso settled over his head, and he was hurled with stunning force upon his back.

Active as a cat, Fool Zimmerman leaped upon him, kneeling on his arms and fastening his bony fingers around the sheriff's throat, effectually cutting off all outcry. He was almost immediately joined by Gomez and Dick Piner, who speedily gagged the betrayed man, then bound his arms behind his back and removed his weapons.

"Money easy earned!" chuckled the burly rascal.

"Thanks to me!" snapped Fool Zimmerman. "But we haven't finished our work yet. Crooked Cale and a lot of other sapheads are abroad, and if they stumble across us we may go to where gol I wouldn't keep long."

It was a timely observation, and raising Weston to his feet, the two ruffians supported him between them, like a drunken man, and sent Fool Zimmerman on ahead to give them warning of any ugly obstacles in the road.

In this manner they left the valley by way of the Devil's Staircase, without meeting a soul, luckily for themselves. Once at the hill-top, they struck off into a side trail, and for the first time began to breathe freely.

"Not much chance of a slip-up now," exclaimed Piner, in an exultant tone. "Wonder what Reckless Ralph means to do with the 'coon, anyhow?"

"Roast him, I hope!" chuckled Gomez, smacking his lips.

Until now, Weston had made little or no resistance. The fall had partially stunned him, and left his senses confused. But now, as his worst suspicions were confirmed—when he knew that he was being taken to Ralph Keeler, there to suffer death beyond a doubt—he relaxed his muscles and fell a heavy, lifeless weight upon the hands of his conductors.

At first the ruffians were filled with surprise and even consternation, for their captive seemed suddenly stricken dead, but as they turned his face so the moonlight fell upon it, they read the truth in the dauntless eyes. If he must die, at least he would not walk to his grave.

Dick Piner laughed good-humoredly where Gomez cursed.

"He's game. It don't matter much. We're almost to the horses, and Fool Zimmerman can bring them up."

An order to that effect was given, and shortly the decoy returned, leading four stout animals, ready for the road.

Weston was lifted into one saddle and securely bound there, to guard against his falling or

throwing himself off, then the party rode rapidly toward the rendezvous.

The prisoner, though he knew there was scarcely a chance of his escaping with life from the snare into which he had so blindly blundered, carefully noted their course by stars and landmarks. This did not escape the attention of his guards, but they made no effort to hinder him.

"Take it all in if you like," chuckled Piner, maliciously. "It'll never do you any good, though, where you are going. Reckless Ralph will soon blot you out."

After a few minutes of brisk riding, the rendezvous was reached, the regular signals made and answered, then Walter Weston found himself face to face with the notorious outlaw.

By the red light of the lamp, he saw that Reckless Ralph had changed little in outward semblance since his flight from the lower diggings, and he noticed, too, the close resemblance between him and the schoolma'am.

"So, dear Mr. Weston, we meet at last, face to face—but under somewhat different circumstances from those you pictured when you took a solemn oath to hunt me down and hang me like a sheep-killing cur! You are the captive—you shall die as you swore I should—the death of a dog!"

Weston was unable to reply in words, but a scornful, defiant light filled his blue eyes—a look of utter contempt that stung the outlaw to the quick. With an angry curse, he leaped upward and dealt the bound man a vicious blow in the face.

The outlaws laughed boisterously. There was no feeling of mercy or pity in their hearts for the sheriff. He had set out to hunt them down, and had failed. It was right that he should abide the consequences. While he lived, there was no safety for them.

But Ralph Keeler quickly regained his self-command.

"You hope to make me kill you, and thus break my vow," he said, with a short, hard laugh. "I have said that you shall hang, and I mean to keep my word. To horse, boys!"

In silence the outlaws prepared their horses, and rode out of the cavern. When Reckless Ralph was in his present mood, the most daring among them feared to cross him.

Still, Ralph Keeler did not wholly neglect caution. Two scouts were sent forward to make sure the coast was clear, while he himself rode beside the prisoner.

The stage-road was reached without an alarm being given by the scouts, and the outlaws finally drew rein beneath a huge tree whose boughs extended over the trail.

"Quick with that rope! I am anxious to see the dog kick!"

Two lariats had been knotted together, and then one end flung over a stout limb. A noose was formed, and Weston was led up to the spot where the rope hung.

Reckless Ralph himself adjusted the noose, with no gentle hand, then stepped aside the better to enjoy the spectacle, his face convulsed with rage and hatred, seeming that of a veritable demon.

"Now, haul away!" he cried, hoarsely.

In obedience, the outlaws exerted their strength, and Walter Weston was drawn from the ground into the air.

CHAPTER XI.

CROOKED CALE TO THE RESCUE.

THE devilish laugh which broke from the lips of Reckless Ralph, as he beheld his hated enemy slowly drawn up into the air, was cut short by the rattle of firearms and whistling of bullets, each one of which seemed to have its billet. And accompanying the volley rung out a well-known voice:

"Charge and surround 'em! Don't let one escape!"

At the first report, Ralph Keeler leaped to his horse's side and thus covered his precious person. He saw burly Dick Piner, chief among his executioners, drop the rope and clutch spasmodically at his breast instead, then fall heavily to the ground, followed by two more men as the death-shots rung out.

Bewildered by this sudden attack, and terror-stricken by the death of their fellows, the remainder of those who had hold of the rope, released it and plunged headlong for their horses, seeking safety in precipitate flight.

Reckless Ralph was scarcely less demoralized, but he was resolved not to be wholly thwarted in his vengeance, and fired a shot at Walter Weston just as the slackened rope allowed him to fall to the ground, then leaped upon his horse. He heard a vengeful yell, and caught a glimpse of Crooked Cale rushing toward him—saw the red flash of a revolver exploding, and felt the sting of a bullet creasing his side—then waited for no more, but dashed spurs rowel-deep into the flanks of his horse and sped down the road after his fleeing men, discharging one more shot at the prostrate form of the sheriff as he passed.

Crooked Cale paused long enough to send a brace of bullets after the fugitive, but Reckless Ralph sped on, apparently untouched by the hurtling lead.

A grating curse broke from the deformed, and his one eye flashed venomously as he watched the hated outlaw vanish around a bend in the road, but he did not attempt to follow, hastening to where Weston lay instead.

"Too late to save him, I'm afraid!" he muttered, bending over the prostrate form and quickly removing the suffocating noose. "What the rope left undone, that cowardly devil finished with his bullets—"

"Not exactly, friend," and Weston struggled to arise. "A little uncertain about the throat, but with a whole skin!"

"Thank Heaven!" earnestly cried the deformed, cutting the thongs that confined his friend's arms, and assisting him to his feet. "I was afraid you were done for—"

"Your men—where are they? In pursuit—"

"You see the whole army—rank and file!" laughed Crooked Cale, as the sheriff glanced around with a bewildered air. "Here—arm yourself. We may have to fight for it yet."

As he spoke, Crooked Cale removed a belt of weapons from the dead body of Dick Piner, and Weston accepted it mechanically. He cou-

not yet realize that one man had effected his release from nearly a score single-handed.

"Come!" and Crooked Cale touched his shoulder, impatiently, "we had better take to cover. If these cowardly rascals stop for breath long enough to discover they are not pursued, they may pluck up courage enough to return to solve the mystery, and that wouldn't be healthy for us."

"He isn't here!" and Weston turned from the dead bodies in disappointment, to follow his bold rescuer, who quickly reached the snug cover from whence he had made his attack.

"You shouldn't complain," retorted the deformed. "Dick Piner was just about to make his end of the rope fast; that done, I couldn't have routed the rascals in time to save your life. So I opened on the rope-pullers. Reckless Ralph bears my mark, however. I saw him flinch as I fired, though I guess it was only a scratch. Hist!"

The alarm was a false one. No other sound followed, and once more the two men settled down to quiet watching, in hopes that Reckless Ralph would venture back to make sure that his relentless enemy was indeed dead.

In low, guarded tones, Weston told his story. Crooked Cale listened intently.

Thanks to Weston's cool wits, in so carefully marking the course followed by the outlaws when they held him captive, the two adventurers found little difficulty in reaching the hidden retreat, increasing their caution as they drew near, and finally sinking down under cover that commanded the entrance to the cavern.

Time passed on slowly enough, but they were playing for a heavy stake, and the necessary patience did not fail them. Thus hour after hour rolled on without any one attempting either to leave or approach the cave.

Cale the Hunchback suddenly broke the silence.

"Do you know, I begin to believe we have been playing the fool, most decidedly?"

Weston only growled inarticulately. If ever a man had good cause for ill-humor, he had. He had suffered insult and abuse, been beaten and hung, and after all his enemy had eluded his grasp. Enough to sour the temper of an angel!

"We lost valuable time waiting for them to return to the tree where they almost hung you, and still more lurking here. The first was my fault, the last yours—so we are even on that score."

"It's easy enough to repeat what we have done—not so easy to say what we should do," growled the sheriff.

"It may be too late now, but there's only one chance left that I see," added Crooked Cale, arising. "That is to pay Miss Mary Trubart a visit of inquiry!"

Weston leaped to his feet with something that sounded very much like an oath. Strange that he had not thought of this before, knowing or suspecting what he did. But everything seemed to go wrong with him that night, and all thoughts to come just too late to be of any service.

"Lead the way in a hurry! I could find it, you must know the ground better than I do."

A single minute lost now may make all the difference between success and utter failure!"

"Then you have hit the same trail—"

"I know that Ralph Keeler had a twin sister, the perfect image of himself, and I know that his face is a counterpart of your schoolma'am's. But there's no time to talk now. Travel, or we may be fooled again."

Crooked Cale said no more, but led the way at a pace that severely tested the powers of the athletic sheriff, neither pausing for breath or rest until the hill-crest above the schoolma'am's cabin was reached.

"There's our goal; what course do you advise?"

"If our game is inside, he can't leave without our knowledge. If he is not there, he may yet come. Wouldn't it be best to ambush where we can command the door, and then wait until daylight, unless he comes before?"

Crooked Cale nodded approvingly.

"Exactly what I would have advised. If he is not there, or don't come, he has fled for good. We have all to gain and nothing to lose. Follow me, and show your skill as a scout."

Weston obeyed, and the two men gradually approached the lone cabin, taking advantage of every shadow and cover, finally settling themselves comfortably in a clump of bushes only a few yards distant from the cabin door. From this ambush they could command every approach, as well as the building itself. If Ralph Keeler was inside, or if he ventured to return to the cabin, his death or capture was inevitable.

For some time the watchers were silent as death. Not a sound came from the cabin. A few lights twinkled down in the valley, and an occasional drunken shout that came faintly to their ears, told them that old as the night was, some lucky digger had not yet sufficiently celebrated his "strike."

"Hunt Ralph Keeler to the gallows, and you will not only cancel that debt, but leave me your debtor forever!" muttered Crooked Cale earnestly, almost fiercely.

"He has given you cause for hatred, then?"

"Tom Pierson told you the story of my life?"

Weston nodded. Crooked Cale laughed low but bitterly.

"I forgot. He could not tell it all, because no one knows it but myself. Some day, perhaps, I may tell you—not now. About Ralph Keeler. I begin to believe he is my nephew; that means my deadliest foe. I may be mistaken, for he was only a little boy when I saw him last, but even then a devil incarnate. He had a twin sister—"

"And you believe this schoolma'am is that sister?"

"Only since yesterday, but I do believe it now, firmly. If that is true, many things are explained—among others, why my wife has been made a welcome visitor here, when all others, male and female, have been rigidly excluded. She has been tempting Miranda—"

Crooked Cale stopped abruptly, as though finding he was saying too much, and to relieve him, Weston said:

"He must come soon, if at all. It is growing light in the east. I'm afraid, though, we have missed it again."

"He may be inside. If so, we will take him, dead or alive."

"Hardly the last," said the sheriff, gravely. "He is no coward, and fights with a halter around his neck. He could make a stout fight inside those walls."

"Let us prove that he is there, and half an hour later I can bring five hundred men to carry it by storm, if necessary."

Weston made no reply. His faith was about gone, and he felt that Reckless Ralph had escaped him for good. It had been a lucky chance his stumbling upon the notorious outlaw, after such a long search, and such chances rarely come twice to the same man.

Slowly the time passed. The light brightened in the east and at length a new day was fairly born.

Crooked Cale drew his revolvers and removing the caps, assured himself that each nipple was filled with powder, then placed fresh caps on the tubes, pressing them firmly home, like one who feels a single miss-fire may result fatally to himself.

"What are your plans?" asked Weston, cautiously.

"Short and sweet," laughed the deformed, grimly. "I am going over there and rap at the door for admittance—"

"And receive a bullet for answer, supposing Reckless Ralph is inside! Don't be foolhardy, man! Let me keep watch here while you slip away and bring the marshal and his posse—"

"To be laughed at if they found the nest empty! No; I mean to have my own way in this. Do you lie here—"

"If you go, I go, too," resolutely interposed Weston.

"And so insure failure if he is there! I ask it as a favor. There is no loophole. They can't shoot me down without opening the door, and even if shot dead I will throw myself into the opening. Before they can close the door you can make your rush and take him."

Without pausing for a reply, Crooked Cale strode rapidly across the interval, and reaching the cabin unchallenged, rapped loudly upon the door, then drew his revolver and held it in readiness for instant use.

CHAPTER XII.

A MOONLIGHT FLITTING.

KNOWING as he did from the reports of his scouts and spies, that the Hunchback had left Celestial City at the head of a strong force, and recognizing the voice of the deformed landlord, it was only natural that Reckless Ralph should believe the attack was made in force. Bold enough he certainly was, when there was anything to be gained thereby, but he felt sure he had sent his first bullet home to the heart of his hated enemy, and he knew a surer way of crushing Crooked Cale than by meeting him hand to hand in a grapple of death.

Diligently he spurred on in the rear of his demoralized fellows, unconsciously increasing their fears by the rapid thud of his horse's hoofs—magnified by their terror into the united tramp of a regiment of lynchers—until he reached the same point at which he had abandoned the main trail on the preceding night.

Here he turned aside, then pressed on rapidly until he neared the cavern.

According to his invariable custom, Reckless Ralph observed great caution in approaching the cabin, and waited for his low signal to be answered before he ventured to leave cover and advance to the door.

He entered the building, but his stay was short. In a few minutes he emerged, dressed entirely different, a full beard of glossy black hair disguising his face.

Hastening up the hill, Reckless Ralph remounted his horse, passed around to the head of the Devil's Stairway, descended it and then trotted rapidly up to the front of the Spread Eagle.

The hotel was almost deserted, as he knew from experience would be the case.

He leisurely ascended the stairs leading to the sleeping-rooms. He met no one, and betraying a perfect familiarity with the building, opened one of the chamber doors and quickly entered it noiselessly closing the door again.

The room was small, dimly lighted by a lamp turned low, but the rays were bright enough to reveal a double bed, and a woman's head pressing one of the pillows.

A single glance assured Reckless Ralph that he had made no mistake, and noiselessly approaching the stand upon which the night lamp stood, he turned on the blaze.

The bright rays, falling full upon the face of the sleeper, broke the chains of slumber, and Miranda—for she it was—started up on one elbow, her eyes wide open with mingled surprise and terror.

"For your life, not a word—not a sound!" hissed Reckless Ralph, slipping off the hairy mask with one hand, while the other hovered over the face of the terrified woman.

It was well for him that he had taken this precaution, for Miranda, instead of being tranquillized by the sight of his face, as he had expected, seemed more alarmed than ever, and only for his quick, firm grasp, she would have shrieked aloud for aid.

"Come, don't be such a fool!" he muttered, angrily, one palm over her mouth, the other holding her hands. "If you raise the house, I can escape by leaping out of yonder window, but you can't dodge the consequences so easily. I haven't time to argue the case clean through, or to be as polite as usual, but I'll make amends in the future. Listen. I am going to take my hand away, but if you attempt to cry out, or to speak above your breath, you are ruined.

"Go—for the love of mercy, go and leave me!" sobbed the wretched woman, every moment realizing more and more fully the double peril which threatened her. "If he should return—"

"He would be very much surprised, of course, and not a little shocked," coolly interposed Reckless Ralph.

"Tell me why you come here," demanded Miranda, with a calmness lent by desperation. "What are your demands?"

"That you elope with me."

"And if I refuse?"

"You will not, but if you should pursue a course so suicidal, I will wait here until Crooked

Cale returns. If he gives me time, I will tell him all—who I am, why I am here, how long you have known me as I really am—"

"He would kill me and you!" gasped Miranda, shuddering.

"Unless I got beforehand with him, yes. Most certainly you would never escape his vengeance!"

Stunned, bewildered, the wretched woman listened to Reckless Ralph, utterly unable to resist his iron will. At any moment her dreaded husband might return, and she knew his terrible temper would never suffer him to hear her explanation. Passionately as he loved her, he would take her life.

"Come—every minute spent here is at the risk of your life, Miranda," added Reckless Ralph, believing the time had come to press matters. "Crooked Cale may return at any moment, and you can guess what would happen then."

"I will not go—I fear you even more than I do him—for he loves me!" gasped Miranda, shrinking away.

"Refuse at your peril!" he grated. "Swear that you will obey me in every particular!"

It was the last struggle of a weak will. The fear of death which she saw hovering over her, proved too strong for the miserable woman, and Reckless Ralph saw that he had conquered.

Removing his grasp and replacing his knife, he took down a crucifix from where it hung against the wall, and held it to Miranda's lips. Half-unconsciously she kissed the sacred emblem of her religion, then Reckless Ralph tossed it contemptuously aside, with a mocking laugh.

"Now get up and dress yourself, my darling. Make short work of it, too, or Crooked Cale may drop in upon us, after all."

Reckless Ralph withdrew, and tearing a blank leaf from a Bible lying there, he wrote rapidly.

Miranda, pale as a ghost, but more composed now that her oath had been given, slipped out of bed and hurriedly dressed herself.

"Good!" exclaimed Reckless Ralph, on finding her ready dressed when he re-entered the room. "Take what money and jewels you have—and you may open Crooked Cale's safe, too. Remember your oath!" he added, fiercely, as the woman recoiled from him with a shudder of disgust and aversion.

As he spoke Reckless Ralph placed the note he had written upon the stand, turning away with a low, mocking laugh, and addressing Miranda.

"Come. We'll pay the safe a visit, then get horses and shake the dust of Celestial City off our feet forever."

The lamp was extinguished, the door opened and the guilty couple stole softly to the stairs. They descended and entered the office, being greeted by a sleepy stare from the bartender who, recognizing the landlady, again drooped his head and resumed his fitful slumbers, satisfied that all was right.

Miranda opened the safe and handed several bags of gold-dust to Reckless Ralph, who quickly disposed of them upon his person. The clock showed how late the hour was, and he began to fear that Crooked Cale would even yet make his appearance in time to foil his diabolical revenge.

Grasping Miranda's arm, he hurried out to the stables, where he soon equipped two of the best horses and led them forth.

Swinging Miranda into the saddle, he mounted the other horse, and holding her bridle-rein, urged the animals up the street at full speed, caring little now whether he aroused curiosity or not. It would be a bold man that ventured to check him now!

CHAPTER XIII.

CROOKED CALE IN PURSUIT.

BUT the precaution taken by the Hunchback was unnecessary. The echoes awakened by his loud knocking died away, but no sound of human voice or of footstep came from within the little cabin. Again and again he knocked, but still no answer came, and then he drew back a pace and flung himself with all his force against the door. It had not been locked or barred, fastened merely with a latch, and as this yielded, Crooked Cale plunged at full length across the room, oversetting tables and chairs with a fearful clatter that deceived Weston into the belief that the deformed had fallen into a trap laid by the cunning outlaw.

Rushing forward with ready weapons, the sheriff leaped across the threshold just as Crooked Cale arose from the debris. Both saw that the cabin was deserted, tenanted only by themselves.

Upon the bed and floor lay scattered articles of male attire which Weston found no difficulty in recognizing as the garments worn by Reckless Ralph but a few hours before.

"That settles it, then!" growled Crooked Cale, when his companion pointed out this fact. "We had only this one chance left. We've slipped up on that, and we might as well go down to the hotel and get some breakfast. Reckless Ralph has levanted, bag and baggage, family and all!"

But Weston was not wholly satisfied. He closely examined the walls and floor in search of some secret hiding-place, but without success. Nor did he neglect the little, dark loft overhead, only leaving off when thoroughly satisfied that by no possibility could a human being be hidden around the cabin.

Sullen and disappointed, the two men left the cabin and descended the hill, neither speaking a word until after they reached the hotel.

It was clear that Crooked Cale also began to feel the want of repose, and he bore Weston company up the stairs, proceeding straight to his wife's chamber.

Weston paused at the door of the room occupied by his wounded friend, listening to discover if possible whether he was awake or asleep, when a sharp cry from the direction taken by Crooked Cale startled him. In surprise he turned toward the chamber, but the sound was not repeated at once, and he began to think he had been alarmed for nothing. Yet so sharp had been the cry, that it aroused several of the lodgers, including Tom Pierson, and drew them from their rooms in airy undress. They began to pelt Weston with eager questions, but before he could answer even the first, another and wilder yell came from the chamber entered by the Hunch-

back, followed by a heavy fall and the crash of furniture.

As one man they rushed forward, burst open the door and entered the chamber, Walter Weston in the lead.

They saw Crooked Cale prostrate upon the floor, writhing and twisting in a horrible manner, bloody froth flying from his lips—the picture of a raving demoniac.

"He has a fit—he'll kill himself!" cried Weston, leaping forward and grasping the sufferer. "Help me, somebody!"

With a howl of indescribable fury, Crooked Cale turned upon the man who was trying to relieve him, his bony fingers almost uniting in the flesh, his strong teeth seeking to close upon Weston's throat. Strong and active as the sheriff was, he found himself as helpless in the hands of the madman as would be a child in the grasp of an infuriated giant, and if left to themselves, Crooked Cale would literally have torn him limb from limb.

Amazed, bewildered, the lodgers stood in open-mouthed wonder for a moment, but then Pierson, catching up a chair dealt Crooked Cale a terrible blow upon the head.

The chair was shattered into a dozen pieces, and Crooked Cale fell forward upon the sheriff like a dead man, but even then it was nearly impossible to tear away his terrible grasp.

Bruised, bleeding, gasping for breath, Walter Weston was dragged from beneath the seeming corpse by his friend. But even in this sore extremity he did not feel anger toward the man who had so nearly cut short his life.

"Look to him—somebody," he gasped. "It's only a fit—but he'll go mad—if left to lay there."

Tom Pierson was more concerned about his younger friend, and half-led, half-carried him to his own chamber, only leaving him to look after Crooked Cale when Weston declared himself all right and sound, save for a few bruises.

Thus reassured, Tom Pierson returned to the other chamber, where he found Crooked Cale sitting upon the floor, staring around him with a dazed, almost idiotic stare, a stream of blood trickling down over his scarred face. Tom knew that this came from the heavy blow he had dealt him in order to save the life of Walter Weston, and he felt almost like a murderer as he noticed the vacant look in the one eye of the unfortunate deformed.

He spoke to him gently, but Crooked Cale only answered with an idiotic glance and laugh.

"Go for a doctor, some one," cried Pierson, kneeling beside the landlord. "And if you see her, send up his wife—"

That word broke the stupor which had fallen upon the brain of Crooked Cale, and hurling Pierson aside, he leaped to his feet and dashed from the room, growling and snarling like some maddened wild beast.

As rapidly as possible, Pierson followed, but too late to arrest Crooked Cale. He had rushed out of the hotel, into the stable, and as Tom reached the veranda, he saw the madman riding a bareback, bridleless horse, dashing up the street like a thunderbolt.

Tom Pierson had hardly left his friend alone,

when the latter made a startling discovery. His throat and breast paining him, Weston opened his clothing, and a crumpled piece of paper fell out upon the bed. Despite his pain, he wondered how this had come there, and opened the paper.

It was the note written by Reckless Ralph, the discovery of which had drawn the first cry from Crooked Cale's lips, and reading the contents had thrown him into that terrible spasm.

Weston read the note, his cheeks paling, his heart beating like a trip-hammer, for he now knew the truth. He heard the deformed rush down stairs, and thrusting the fatal note into his pocket, he hastened after, joining Pierson.

"Mad—mad as a March hare!" ejaculated the young miner. "Wonder what caused it—can you tell?" turning to Weston.

"His wife has eloped—"

"I knowed it!" exclaimed a digger, who had just come up. "I said so last night, or rather this mornin', seein' it wasn't fur from daylight when I met 'em—ridin' hosses full split like they was in a monstrous hurry—"

"In which direction?" asked Weston.

"By the upper road—same as the Hunchback tuck."

"Come, Tom—we must follow. He will murder them both. For his sake, not theirs, we must prevent that if possible," hurriedly uttered Weston, hastening toward the stables.

In ten minutes more they were both mounted upon good horses, riding swiftly along in pursuit of the pursuer.

CHAPTER XIV.

RETRIBUTION.

THE sun had just set, its last red rays gilding the rugged mountain peaks and from thence reflected into the valley, where sit a man and a woman near a bubbling spring, talking earnestly. Not far away feed two horses, whose appearance betrays long and hard travel.

The man is Reckless Ralph Keeler, his face no longer hidden behind that black mask of hair; the woman is Miranda Keystone, wife of Crooked Cale. Her face betrayed no token of the regret or remorse one would naturally expect. Frail and fickle always, there were smiles upon her countenance, soft words dropping from her lips.

Crouching behind a rock not twenty feet from the couple, was Crooked Cale, more than ever like a wild beast, for now the light of reason had fled.

A stinging, mocking allusion to himself, at which Miranda laughed merrily—then the avenger made his leap.

Almost ere he realized his peril, Reckless Ralph was grasped by the madman, raised aloft as a strong man handles an infant, then hurled to the ground with terrible force.

The woman shrieked with horror as she recognized her husband, and attempted to flee, but his hand, firm but gentle stayed her flight.

"Sit down. You have a part to play in his punishment."

The words were spoken calmly, but the woman trembled with a vague yet sickening fear, and her limbs failed her.

Crooked Cale never glanced toward her, as

she lay a nerveless heap upon the stones, but turned to Reckless Ralph. A stranger looking at his careful manipulations, would have thought him devoted to the senseless man, but Miranda read him aright, and her brain reeled.

When her senses returned, Reckless Ralph had recovered from that terrible shock; though pale as death, it was not through fear, for he was laughing malignantly in the face of the avenger. One arm hung in an awkward position, having been crushed by his fall.

"Work your own sweet will, Caliban," the outlaw was saying as Miranda raised her head. "You have the upper hand now, and I'll never complain—last of all beg for mercy. I've had my inning—short but glorious. From my youngest days I have been taught to hate you and yours, and in learning this, I learnt all manner of evil. I am proud of it. I glory in the evil I have done, and the sweetest thought of all is the knowledge that I have helped to make your life a living hell. Ha! ha! little did you think why it was that the fair Miranda spent so much time at the schoolma'am's cabin—she came there to see me! And between our passionate love-kisses, we laughed at you, grim, hideous, horned Caliban—"

Never another word came from those mocking lips. Reckless Ralph, knowing that escape was impossible, forced the madman to slay him painlessly.

Crooked Cale turned to where Miranda crouched, sobbing and shivering with terror. Gently he raised her from the ground, turning her face so that the full moon could shine upon it. Tenderly, almost reverently, he touched his lips to her fair brow. A spasm of pain still further distorted his features, but only for a moment. Then, his voice cold and icy calm, he spoke:

"That is the last time, Miranda. And with it take my forgiveness for all the wrong, all the pain and sorrow you have caused me since that ill-fated day when our fates were linked together—"

"Thank God! you forgive—you will not harm me!" gasped the poor weak creature, hope springing up in her heart anew.

"They know all—they know that you fled from your husband for love of another man. They are laughing and jeering at us both even now. Then would you live on, bearing such an awful brand of shame?"

"Mercy! he forced me—I did not want to go—let me live—let me live! I am too young to die! Mercy, husband—"

"Stop!" and the fires of madness flashed up anew in Crooked Cale's one eye. "Never more that name! I have no wife—I am no husband—only an avenger! You fled with him. He is gone, but you can overtake him. You loved or played at love here—you two can be wedded in the land of spirits!"

A black cloud crept slowly over the face of the moon.

Heart-sick and awe-stricken Walter Weston and Tom Pierson looked upon the terrible scene, just as the morning sun rose above the mountain peaks.

As soon as they could break the spell which had fallen upon them, they hollowed out a space

beneath a huge bowlder, gently placed the body of the ill-fated woman at rest, and covered her remains forever from sight.

"The other too—for poor Cale's sake," said Pierson.

In silence they returned to the death altar. Then Weston pointed down at the face of the dead man and spoke:

"Look close, and tell me what thought strikes you, Tom."

"A face that strongly resembles that of the dear little woman whom I hoped to one day make my wife," was the grave reply. "They may have been related, but that makes no difference in my love. She may have harbored him from his enemies—from justice, but blood is thicker than water, and I honor her all the more for her faithful, sisterly devotion."

"Dear Tom, old friend, you know I would not give you pain needlessly," said Weston, his voice unsteady, "but you must know the truth some time. Better now, and have it over with."

As he spoke, he handed Pierson the piece of paper that had fallen so strangely into his possession—the note which Reckless Ralph had written, which Crooked Cale clutched in his hand when he fell to the floor in a fit, and which had, during his fierce struggle with Weston, slipped into the sheriff's bosom. Space will not admit of its reproduction here, and a few words will give all that is necessary.

It was a terse account of the writer's career, with his reasons for playing the peculiar part he had. He spoke of his having to flee from Placer county together with his sister, who had been severely wounded in their last conflict with the officers of justice. *A month later, his sister died.* He was hunted hotly, and as a better disguise, he resolved to play the part of a woman. He discovered his uncle, Crooked Cale, and then set about a diabolical revenge. To better insure his success, and cover his exploits as a road-agent, he lived a double life, no one save his faithful servant, the old half-breed woman, even suspecting that he and Miss Mary Truhart were one and the same person.

The Hunchback was never after seen or heard of by mortal man. It is almost certain that, his awful vengeance accomplished, he took his own life; but how and where no man knows.

Tom Pierson soon recovered from the shock of his discovery, and found a wife who adored him, even as he did her.

Walter Weston returned to Oroville, where he prospered greatly, but he never forgot the strange story of CALE, THE HUNCHBACK OF THE MINES, and popular landlord of the Spread Eagle, Celestial City.

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